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Discipline Disproportionality of Black Students with Disabilities: Principals' Perspectives

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership

by

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to examine the problem of practice found in discipline disproportionality of Black students with disabilities in an urban school district with a majority Black student and teacher population. Through personal interviews with building level administrators, data was gained to determine common themes that impact discipline disproportionality of Black students with disabilities. A qualitative inquiry approach, in the form of a case study was used to determine principals' perspectives about factors that may impact discipline disproportionality. Student disciplinary records were examined to verify disproportionality and investigate patterns and categories related to students with and without disabilities being issued Office Discipline Referrals (ODRs). Interviews were conducted with building level administrators (principals and assistant principals) and their responses recorded and open coded to determine themes. Insight from this data will assist in determining what disciplinary practices may need to change and if additional and specific and professional development needs to occur for teachers and administrators.

Acknowledgements

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Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to every student and teacher who has struggled in a classroom. May we find a better way together so that we can change the world.

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Chapter One – Introduction

Introduction

The purpose of this study is to examine the problem of practice found in discipline disproportionality of Black students with disabilities in an urban school district with a majority Black student and teacher population. Extensive research exists focusing on discipline disproportionality for students with disabilities (Wagner et al., 2004), however, the majority of said research has occurred within schools and districts where the majority ethnicity was White. There has been significantly less research conducted in schools and districts where the majority student and teacher population were Black. This dissertation examines racial disproportionality in the discipline of students with disabilities in a school district that is predominantly Black. The goal of the research is to develop awareness of disproportionality within the district, assist school leaders in designing programs, policies or practices that support teachers in providing a more equitable disciplinary process for students with disabilities.

Problem Statement

Since the mid 1970s, research has noted disparity in the discipline between Black and White students. For over four decades, Black students have seen higher rates of exclusionary practices such as out-of-school suspension and expulsion, than any other group of students (Losen & Gillespie, 2012; Skiba et al., 2009). Black students with disabilities are at an even greater risk of experiencing exclusionary practices than their White peers (Losen & Gillespie, 2012; Skiba et al., 2009). This cycle of removal can ultimately lead to the school to prison pipeline (Williams, 2016). The use of exclusionary practices with students of color and disabilities, creates a loss of instruction time for some of our most vulnerable students. When students with disabilities are removed from the classroom, they miss valuable academic and

behavioral instruction. Loss of instruction not only creates wider achievement gaps, but it also causes students to lose out learning behavioral strategies that could assist them in being more successful in the classroom.

According to Pijanowski and Brady (2020), “School leaders are expected to create environments in schools where children are treated fairly in the ways they directly interface with the school” (p. 11). While we often think of the school environment from the framework of the classroom, the school environment encompasses all areas of student life. With a few exceptions (possession of a gun, drugs and violence), principals have the authority to determine consequences for student misbehaviors. They have the ability to choose inclusive interventions or exclusionary practices. The principal’s decision in determining which way to address student discipline can support an environment of fairness, or one of disparity. The purpose of this study is to examine the problem of practice found in discipline disproportionality of Black students with disabilities in an urban school district with a majority Black student and teacher population.

Focus on Instructional and Systemic Issues

Discipline disproportionality of Black students with disabilities in a majority Black school district is a multi-layered systemic issue. The impact of exclusionary practices creates not only a loss of instruction time but a relationship of disengagement that follows students throughout the course of their education. Lack of teacher effectiveness in providing needed behavioral and academic accommodations, teachers having preconceived opinions (implicit bias) about the difficulty of working with students with disabilities and a lack of shared behavioral expectations within the school result in a turbulent trifecta that results in students being removed from the classroom.

How the Problem is Directly Observable

In May of 2019, Maple Cove School District triggered (activated identification) for the 2017-2018 school year due to significant discipline disproportionality of Black students in special education. In November of 2019, Maple Cove School District once again triggered for significant discipline disproportionality based on 2018-2019 data. Through review of SmartData Dashboard, a digital system that pulls data from the state required eSchool platform, Maple Cove School District students with disabilities are recorded as having a greater number of Office Discipline Referrals or ODRs, than non-disabled peers. On average, Black students with disabilities lost three times as many instruction days due to exclusionary practices than their non-disabled peers. This data is consistent with trends found throughout the state of Arkansas.

How the Problem is Actionable

Maple Cove School District triggered for discipline disproportionality of Black special education students; specifically, students who have received greater than ten days of Out-of-School Suspension (OSS). Historically, less than 5% of exclusionary practices are related to violence or student safety (Skiba, 2008). Most behaviors that result in exclusionary practices are attributed to noisemaking, tardiness or insubordination. Based upon the teacher's perception of student behavior or the student's violation of school behavior conduct policies, teachers assign an ODR. While principals take into consideration the information provided to them through ODRs, they have the sole responsibility of issuing In-School Suspension (ISS), OSS or making a recommendation for expulsion. This means that building level principals have a tremendous influence on impacting discipline disproportionality.

Principals can change the trajectory of student discipline, not only as disciplinarians, but as leaders of teachers. This problem of practice is actionable because knowledge gained from

this study can assist building level administrators in better understanding how their philosophical beliefs may impact their discipline practices. It can also assist them in supporting teachers, through professional development, reflective practice activities, and mentoring, so that the classroom environment is more equitable to Black students with disabilities. Being knowledgeable of their practices could further assist principals in developing programs and policies that may better support the learning environment for students and thus minimize the need for exclusionary practices.

How the Problem Connects to a Broader Strategy of Improvement

This problem of practice connects directly to the Maple Cove School District. By examining factors that may impact discipline disproportionality, Maple Cove School District (MCSD) can determine steps that need to be taken to minimize discipline disproportionality within the district, resulting in the district's removal from the state identified list. This knowledge has the potential to lower absenteeism of students, increase student achievement and increase a positive student perception of school culture for Maple Cove School District if the district chooses to act upon the findings and determine a plan of action to better serve students.

This problem of practice also connects to a broader scope. Discipline disproportionality is not exclusive to Arkansas schools. Schools across the United States see disparity in suspension rates between various groups of students. This problem of practice is unique in that it examines the issue of discipline disproportionality in a setting where the majority of students, teachers and building administrators are Black.

For students to be able to learn, they must first be able to access the learning environment. They cannot do this when they are removed from the classroom. Students who are repeatedly removed from the classroom fall further behind academically. Students with

disabilities miss critical instruction that is not only tied to their academic needs as identified in their IEPs, but many times their behavioral needs.

How Resolving the Problem is High Leverage

The issue of discipline disproportionality in Black students with disabilities is high leverage for more than educational reasons. While the national average for all suspension is 7%, for students with disabilities the rate is over 15% (Losen & Gillespie, 2012). Over the last decade considerable research has noted a connection between students of color with disabilities and the juvenile justice system. The connection, known as the school-to-prison pipeline, is greatest for Black students with disabilities. In examining reports, it is noted that while only 19% of all special education students were Black, correctional facilities reflect over 50% of Black inmates with disabilities (Losen et al., 2014).

Arkansas legislators took steps to remedy the disparity in exclusionary practices in 2017. Arkansas Act 1059 substantially limits the use of OSS and expulsion for students in grades K-5. As noted in the law, a student in grades K-5 cannot be suspended or expelled unless, “the student poses a physical threat to themselves or others or causes a serious disruption that cannot be addressed by other means,” (State of Arkansas, Act 1059, 2017). Although the law attempts to put into place a protection mechanism from exclusionary practices, it does nothing to address students in grades 6 -12. With no such protection mechanism for secondary level students, it is critical that discipline disproportionality for Black students with disabilities be addressed in hopes of dismantling the school-to-prison- pipeline.

Research Questions

While discipline disproportionality of Black students with disabilities is well documented, the majority of research has not occurred in settings where the majority student and

teacher population were Black. This researcher seeks to determine what the systemic issue looks like in an urban school district with a majority Black student and teacher population. The guiding research questions for this study are:

1. How do Office Discipline Referrals (ODRs) differ between students with and without disabilities?
2. From the principal's perspective, what factors influence why students with disabilities receive Office Discipline Referrals in a majority Black school?
3. From the principal's perspective, what factors impact the disciplinary decisions made by building level administrators in regard to students with disabilities?
4. What current policies or practices create benefits or barriers to meeting the needs of students with disabilities?

Overview of Methodology

This study followed a case study qualitative inquiry approach designed to gain deeper understanding of potential root causes. The researcher analyzed discipline data from 2018-2019 and 2019-2020 as gathered from the Maple Cove School District's SmartData Dashboard. This digital system compiles the district's discipline data as pulled from the State required platform, eSchool. Data were categorized based upon disciplinary infractions, who issued the ODR, and students with disabilities vs students without disabilities.

A case study qualitative inquiry approach was utilized to gain perceptual information from building level administrators on the issue of discipline disproportionality for Black students with disabilities. Individual interviews with principals at each educational level (K-5, 6-8 and 9-12) within the Maple Cove School District was conducted via Zoom due to the constraints of COVID-19. Once the study was completed, information was shared with participating

principals, the district superintendent and the Arkansas Department of Elementary and Secondary Education for the purpose of assisting the district in selecting needed programs, designing professional development and making policy adjustments.

Positionality

Positionality is the relationship or connectivity of the researcher to the Problem of Practice. It is the social “position” of the researcher within the structure of the problem and more importantly, how that “position” may affect the collection and/or interpretation of data and the method by which the researcher interacts with the problem. My problem of practice focuses on discipline disproportionality of Black students with disabilities. This section depicts how my experience as a former special education teacher and building level administrator affects my positionality.

Researcher’s Role

As assistant superintendent and interim Special Education Director of Maple Cove School District, I have access to all data and records of the district, including personnel, special education/discipline data and students. As a researcher, my current role will allow me to easily interact with multiple data points, as it is a part of my daily job responsibilities. Although I have 27 years of experience in the educational field, (13 as an administrator), I have served in Maple Cove School District for only 22 months. I have worked to build positive relationships with principals and have been intentional in my service to support them as professionals. While I believe that these relationships are strong and built on mutual respect, being one of their supervisors could pose a barrier to their complete honesty. Although I do not evaluate building leaders, they are aware my role as a leader within the district is to ensure quality education for all students. This awareness could place them in a position to withhold complete honesty.

My previous professional experiences vary regarding school demographics. I have served in large urban schools and small remote rural schools both in Arkansas and Wyoming. In every instance, each school had a diverse student population, however, even in districts that I served with greater than 40% minority student population, the majority of teachers and administrators were white. Prior to serving as an administrator, (principal, assistant superintendent, superintendent), I served as a special education teacher, working with Socially Emotional Disturbed (SED) students who were considered to have the most challenging behaviors.

During my service as a special education teacher, I noticed that frequently my students would receive Office Discipline Referrals from their general education teachers for incidents directly related to their disability. After conferencing with the teachers who wrote the ODRs, I learned that they did not familiarize themselves with the student's Individualized Education Program (IEP) or the student's Behavioral Intervention Plan (BIP). I often worked with teachers who held the opinion that behavior was controllable or that students with disabilities did not belong in the general education setting and thus refused to adhere to the student's BIP. Through advocacy and educating colleagues, I was usually able to minimize ODRs for students with disabilities by ensuring their IEP and BIP were followed.

Maple Cove School District reports that the average teaching experience within the district is 14.35 years (Myschoolinfo.arkansas.gov), however, this is a misnomer. Upon deeper review, over 50% of teachers in the district have less than 5 years of experience in the classroom, and many of those teachers are on professional waivers. Arkansas allows individuals with a bachelor's degree and 18 hours in a specific content field to teach under a waiver. The turbulent status of the district has also lent itself to considerable turnover at the district level, resulting in

little training and accountability regarding services for students with disabilities. As assistant superintendent and Interim Special Education Director, I have been charged with the responsibility of addressing discipline disproportionality for students with disabilities.

I have developed strong relationships with building level administrators within the district. Having served as a building level principal in high poverty schools, I have been able to connect with principals on a deep professional level. One unique factor is that I am one of only two white administrators in the district. In the beginning, this factor posed some challenges in gaining trust with principals and teachers. As the year progressed relationships deepened, and trust was established. Principals are able to openly and honestly share their concerns and frustrations with me and together we seek solutions to best serve students.

I believe that my role as assistant superintendent, specifically in overseeing professional development, coupled with my knowledge of special education and my role as Interim Special Education Director will allow me to more deeply understand the current situation of discipline disproportionality for students with disabilities and better answer my research questions.

Assumptions

Racial discipline disproportionality and discipline disproportionality for students with disabilities are both well documented in research literature (OCR, 2019; Losen & Skiba, 2010; Vincent et al., 2012). Maple Cove School District has a majority Black student and staff population, therefore although the district triggered for racial disproportionality of discipline of students with disabilities, the racial implication is misleading. With a student population of 96% Black, it would be statistically impossible for the majority of students receiving OSS to not be Black. However, due to the Maple Cove School District not having a subpopulation of 10% or greater, the disparity is compared to the state average, resulting in identification. Still, upon

examination of discipline data, students with disabilities in Maple Cove School District have a higher percentage rate of OSS occurrences than their non-disabled peers.

One assumption of the researcher is that due to teacher inexperience and lack of professional development on meeting the needs of students with disabilities, teachers are ineffective in providing accommodations which support student engagement. This lack of engagement results in the student being off task, which then leads to displaying behavioral issues within the classroom. Another assumption is that teachers are not aware of their implicit bias towards special education. New and even veteran teachers already have a challenging job navigating the curriculum and differentiating for students with varying ability levels. The thought of having to provide specialized instruction for a student with a disability can be overwhelming. These assumptions are due to my previous experience in working with inexperienced teachers and teachers who hold personal beliefs regarding services for students with disabilities.

My final assumption is that due to lack of a shared behavior model, teachers are inconsistent with their expectations regarding student behavior. This inconsistency creates confusion for students as they move from classroom to classroom and for principals, who are expected to provide discipline support for teachers. When the concept of insubordination, disrespectfulness or tardiness varies from teacher to teacher, the principal is unable to determine interventions for the behavior and thus make sound decisions regarding student discipline.

Since the inception of special education law in 1975, IDEA calls for educating students with disabilities, “to the maximum extent appropriate” (IDEA LRE, 1975) with their non-disabled peers. Known as the least restrictive environment or LRE, §300.114(a)-200 of federal law requires that:

(ii) Special classes, separate schooling, or other removal of children with disabilities from the regular educational environment occurs only if the nature or severity of the disability is such that education in regular classes with the use of supplementary aids and services cannot be achieved satisfactorily. (IDEA LRE. §300.114(a)).

As a former special education teacher, I am committed to ensuring students with disabilities are allowed access to the general education classroom or LRE. As a former principal, I understand the importance of finding balance between supporting the classroom teacher in having a safe environment conducive to learning and ensuring that students' rights are maintained. I would be amiss if I did not disclose that I am not an advocate of exclusionary practices unless student safety is blatantly compromised and that I believe exclusionary practices are overused due to lack of designing other alternatives.

My bias as a researcher is based upon my experiences as a previous special education teacher, principal, assistant superintendent and superintendent in public schools for the past twenty-seven years. I am a White, middle class female and the first in my family to earn a college degree. I have deep convictions about equity and access for students with disabilities and am aware that I must put aside my philosophical opinion about educating and disciplining students with disabilities in order to gain clear insight from participants in the study.

Due to my belief that exclusionary practices are overused, and that special education students are often deliberately pushed out of the classroom, it will be imperative that I ground myself by being reflective with an accountability partner and that I journal my thoughts to prevent weaving them into the responses of the participants throughout the course of this study.

Definition of Key Terms

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), the nation's federal education law that ensures that public school provide for the educational needs of students with disabilities

Individualized Educational Program (IEP), a written document that lays out specific supports, accommodations, needs and services of a student identified as being disabled

Behavior Intervention Plan (BIP), a plan of action to address and manage a student's behavior.

Discipline Disproportionality, the over or under representation of student discipline actions when compared to other students in a specific category.

eSchool, Arkansas' digital platform that is a comprehensive student information system, which stores all student data related to demographics, behavior and attendance.

Exclusionary Discipline, the practice of removing students from their regular placement as a means of punishment. This includes In-School Suspension (ISS), Out-of-School Suspension (OSS) and Expulsion (EXP)

SmartData Dashboard - Digital platform that pulls data from eSchool and compiles the information into easy-to-read reports.

Organization of the Dissertation

Chapter One of this dissertation introduces the problem of practice and provides an overview of why the study was conducted. Chapter Two contains the literature review and the conceptual framework which assists the reader in understanding how the problem of practice fits within the current literature. Chapter Three describes the methodology utilized to gain a deeper understanding of the problem of practice. Chapter Four presents historical district data gleaned from state and local digital platforms and analyzes data collected from interviews with building level administrators. Chapter Five includes the researcher's interpretation of the data collection, revisits the researcher's conceptual framework, provides recommendations for professional application and suggests future research studies which may be beneficial to gain further understanding of root causes of disproportionality in public education.

Chapter Two – Literature Review

Introduction

The purpose of this study is to examine the problem of practice found in discipline disproportionality of Black students with disabilities in an urban school district with a majority Black student and teacher population. The chapter begins with describing the search methods used to gain knowledge and information to conduct the literature review. The first step in examining relevant literature was to review historical information related to the disparity found in racial and special education and exclusionary practices in schools. The review of literature brought to light three areas of specific interest: the intersection of color and disability, student-adult relationships in majority Black schools, and the impact of exclusionary practices on school climate and culture.

Search Method

The search method began with extensive conversations between the researcher and the Arkansas Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) Student Support Services team. Due to the researcher's district being identified as having significant disproportionality, the researcher was required to meet weekly with DESE to examine potential root causes. As a part of the weekly meetings, various books, articles and legal resources were suggested, in order to better understand disproportionality and the requirements set forth in law. A colleague, who had experience in working with disparity in discipline recommended *The U.S. Commission on Civil Rights: Beyond Suspensions: Examining School Discipline Policies and Connections to the School-to-Prison Pipeline for Students of Color with Disabilities* (July 2019) to gain greater insight. *Solving Disproportionality and Achieving Equity: A Leader's Guide to Using Data to Change Hearts and Minds* by Edward Fergus and *In Search of Wholeness: African American*

Teachers and their Culturally Specific Classroom Practices edited by Jacqueline Jordan Irvine were also read. Articles and journals related to the research topic or subcategories of the topic were located by using electronic databases through the University of Arkansas library and Google Scholar. The databases included: JSTOR, EBSCO and ProQuest. Dissertations relating to subtopics were located through ProQuest and Google Scholar. Table 1 provides a summary of resources used to guide the researcher.

Table 1
Number and Types of Sources Reviewed

Type of Source	Number Reviewed
Journal Articles	42
Personal Interview	1
Dissertations	5
Scholarly Books	13
Government Reports	21
Scholarly Websites	14

Review of the Literature

Based on three-year trend data, Maple Cove School District (MCSD), which consists of majority Black students, staff and building administrators, demonstrated significant disproportionality of discipline of Black students served through special education. The following sections represent topic areas explored to better understand potential root causes of disproportionality and practices that have been explored to reduce racial disproportionality in disciplinary practices of students with disabilities. Search words included: “IDEA and disproportionality,” “school-to-prison-pipeline,” “exclusionary practices,” “characteristics of

predominantly Black schools,” “Black students and Black teachers,” “Black students and special education,” “authoritative model,” and “discipline and special education.”

IDEA and Significant Disproportionality

In 1975, Congress enacted the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA). In 1990, Congress reauthorized EAHCA and changed the title to The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), to ensure that students with disabilities would have the opportunity to receive a Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE). IDEA is composed of four parts: A) General Provisions, B) Assistance for Education of All Children with Disabilities, C) Infants and Toddlers, D) National Support Programs administered at the Federal level. Since 1970, the enactment has remained largely the same (IDEA, 2004).

Considerable research exists not only on the disparity of academic achievement between Black and White students, but on the overrepresentation of Black students identified for special education programs. Heilburn (2016) contends that, “racial disproportionality has been a national concern for decades.” This concern, however, does not merely rest in the realm of academic achievement. Research depicts several decades of disparity exists not only for academic achievement, but also discipline rates based on special education identification, (US Department of Education, March 2014). The reauthorization of IDEA in 2004, designated racial and ethnic disproportionate representation as “one of the top three priorities by Congress,” (Green et al. 2018). In 2016, the recognition of growing disproportionality led to federal guidance from the Office of Civil Rights (OCR) through the *Dear Colleague Letter: Preventing Racial Discrimination in Special Education*, (OCR, 2016), for schools receiving federal funding. This guidance called for states to review their practices and set specifications.

The reauthorization of IDEA required states to monitor disproportionality in specific categories, including exclusionary discipline practices involving students with disabilities. Section 618(d)(2)(b) of IDEA (2004), mandates that 15% of a school's Title VIB funds be allocated for Coordinated Early Intervention Services (CEIS) if there is reported to be significant racial or ethnic disproportionality (Green et al., 2018). Beginning July 1, 2018 states were not only required to be in compliance with the new federal regulations, but also to make significant disproportionality determinations based on the new methodology during the 2018-2019 school year.

States were called upon to calculate a risk ratio for each Local Education Agency (LEA) for each analysis category (identification, placement and discipline). Each state/territory was required to set the criteria for determining when a district would flag for disproportionality. Arkansas set the criteria as having a risk ratio of three (3) for three consecutive years.

For the purpose of this study, the category examined is discipline. According to Dr. Jody Fields (2019), University of Arkansas at Little Rock, any LEA with a risk ratio greater than three (3) for three consecutive years within the same race and analysis category is designated as an LEA having significant disproportionality. In calculating the risk ratio, the cell size (numerator), N size (denominator), and risk ratios threshold. Arkansas's cell = 5, N = 15, and threshold = 3 (2019).

The category is defined as children ages 3-21 who have: 1) 10 or fewer days of out-of-school suspension or expulsions, 2) more than 10 days of out-of-school suspension or expulsions, 3) in-school suspensions of 10 or less days, 4) in-school suspensions of more than 10 days, and 5) disciplinary removals in total. Risk-ratio is defined as "a specific racial/ethnic

group’s risk of experiencing a particular disciplinary removal as compared to the risk of all other children” (Fields 2019) and is determined by: Methodology- Risk Ratio - Discipline

$$\frac{\frac{\text{Number of children from racial/ethnic group in discipline category}}{\text{Number of children with disabilities from racial/ethnic group}}}{\frac{\text{Number of all other children in discipline category}}{\text{Number of all other children with disability}}}$$

Figure 1. Risk Ratio Calculation

Maple Cove School District (MCSD) consists of three elementary schools that serve grades K-5, one middle school which serves grades 6-8 and one high school that serves grades 9-12. MCSD had not previously flagged as having significant disproportionality due to the prior regulations which allowed the state to set the methodology and criteria so that districts with 95% or greater ethnic population or less than 5% of an ethnic population to be considered as outliers. Under the new required calculations of a risk ratio, MCSD’s student enrollment which averages 96% African American, there is not a group to compare within the district, thus the district is compared to the state percentage resulting in a determination of significant disproportionality. With the new federal guidelines, MCSD triggered for significant disproportionality in discipline and least restrictive environment. For the purpose of this study, discipline disproportionality will be the focus.

Exclusionary Practices

Exclusionary practices, defined as removal of the student from their regular school environment as a form of punishment, has escalated since the early 1970’s. Many attribute this increase to the implementation of “zero tolerance” policies, which became prevalent in 1980-90s in reaction to a perceived increase in school violence, (Losen & Skiba, 2010; Skiba, 2014). Zero

tolerance policies focus on punitive measures that seek removal of the student from school.

Proponents of zero tolerance policies argue removal of the student is necessary in order to ensure the safety of other students.

Many states, including Arkansas, have specific legislative requirements for removal from school for “violent” reasons (Brady, 2002). These typically include the most extreme behaviors such as: possession of drugs, guns and weapons. This type of behavior accounts for only 5% of school removals. According to the US Commission on Civil Rights briefing, *Beyond Suspensions: Examining School Policies and Connections to the School-to-Prison Pipeline for Students of Color with Disabilities*, “as many as 95 percent of out-of-school suspensions are for non-violent misbehavior - like being disruptive, acting disrespectful, tardiness, profanity, and dress-code violations” (OCR, 2019, p. 27).

In 2015-2016, Arkansas reported losing 140,881 instruction days per 100 students due to exclusionary discipline and was one of eleven states that reported “higher gaps than the national average between the suspension rates of Black and White students, for both boys and girls” (US Office of Civil Rights, 2019, p. 150). Of those days, white students lost 16 days of instruction compared to 82 days lost by black students. Students with disabilities lost 42 days of instruction compared to 28 days by students without disabilities. During the 2018-2019 school year, Maple Cove School District reported a 93% attendance rate and a 68% graduation rate. While on the surface 93% may appear to be a healthy percentage, it equates to approximately 16 days, or three weeks, of lost instruction per student during the school year. It is important to note that in MCSD, policy dictates that students who acquire greater than ten days on unexcused absences, are denied credit towards graduation.

Aside from lost instruction time, exclusionary practices cost school districts financially. Schools receive monies based on student enrollment, and average daily membership (ADM). Every day that a student is not in school, is a day that the school does not receive funding for that student. In Arkansas, student attendance is a factor that is taken into consideration on the school's state report card. This means exclusionary practices directly impact all students. The inverse relationships between student suspensions and attendance, ultimately results in loss for all students.

Although data from Spring 2019 ACT-Aspire noted that there was growth for Maple Cove School District, the district's state identification consists of two elementary schools with "Fs," one elementary school with a grade of "D," the middle schools is rated as a "D" and the high school as an "F." In speaking with many parents, students and community members, most share a negative perception of each school's climate, express concern about student safety and point-out high disciplinary rates. Continuing to perpetuate the cycle of removing students from the instructional setting leaves them further behind. This behavior not only sets students up for immediate failure, it increases their risk of a lifetime of failure.

Black Student

While exclusionary practice can negatively impact all students, Black students are at a much higher risk. Although Black students are more likely to receive an Office Discipline Referral (ODR) there is no published research to indicate that Black students have increased behavioral problems (McIntosh et al., 2014). Research literature, however, well documents the "disproportionately high representation of minority students among students who are suspended or expelled" (Vincent et al., 2012, p. 586). Black students are three times more likely than their White peers to be suspended from school (Losen & Skiba, 2010). While White students are

more likely to be suspended for objective issues such as alcohol or drugs, Black students are more likely to be suspended for subjective issues. Black elementary students are more likely to be suspended for inappropriate language, defiance, non-compliance, and disruption; at the middle school – abusive language, bullying, lying and cheating and tardiness or truancy (Heilbrun, 2016).

Urban schools with high poverty and high minority student populations are more likely to suspend and expel students. Students from low socioeconomic status families are more likely to have a higher number of behavior problems, lower levels of literacy and more likely to have a negative attitude about school (Cagle, 2017). In fact, “Schools with a high number of low SES students and a high number of minority students are strong indicators for high suspension rates” (Cagle, 2017, p.7). However, even when poverty is taken into consideration, Black students are still more likely to be suspended than White students (Cagle, 2017).

Students with Disabilities

Since the beginning of formalized education, students with disabilities have experienced educational exclusionary practices that are often unethical and inhumane. Examples of these practices include institutionalizing students with disabilities to segregated education. The 1954 Supreme Court ruling of *Brown v. Board of Education* established that students could not be excluded or segregated based upon unalterable characteristics. The “separate but equal doctrine” not only applies to racial desegregation, but it also applies to students with disabilities who receive special education services (Williams, 2016, p.143). Despite the slow move to inclusion throughout the 20th century, students with disabilities experience exclusionary practices disproportionate to their non-disabled peers (Yell, 2012). While multiple researchers have

documented racial disparities in exclusionary practices, research on disparities in students with disabilities has received less attention.

The Civil Rights Data Collection Survey reports, students with disabilities are two times more likely to experience exclusionary discipline, even though they only represent 12% of the student population nationwide, (U.S. Department of Education, 2014). Losen and Gillespie (2012) reported that while the national average for student suspension is approximately 7%, students with disabilities are more than double at 15%.

Students with disabilities have a higher risk of being suspended or expelled than their non-disabled peers and students identified as having emotional or behavioral disorders have an even higher rate of experiencing exclusionary practices. Suspension rates of secondary students identified under the IDEA category of emotional disturbance (ED) have risen to almost 50% since 1980's (Wagner et al., 2004). Students with academic skill deficits have a higher risk of problem behaviors and are more likely to experience exclusionary discipline (McIntosh et al., 2014). "Students with emotional and behavioral disorders, depression or mental illness," (Vincent et al., 2012, p. 586) are at highest risk of receiving exclusionary practices. Vincent notes that being suspended or expelled has less to do with the behavioral violation of the student and more about the school that the student attends.

Suspensions are generally a result of serious or multiple ODRs. "Discipline disproportionality results from an interaction between the behavior of students and the behavior of adults within schools" (McIntosh et al., 2014, p.10). Students with disabilities, especially students diagnosed with emotional disturbance (ED) or other health impairment (OHI) are more likely to receive multiple suspensions. These students are generally in need of intensive behavior interventions. One issue with implementing exclusionary practices is that it does not allow for

the student's disruptive behaviors to be addressed through providing alternative ways of behavior that could allow for preventing future inappropriate behaviors. Providing quality education to students, who have learning deficits can assist in lowering behavioral risks of students (McIntosh et al., 2014).

Implicit bias occurs when “generalized associations formed from systematically limited experience or exposure,” (McIntosh et al., 2014) and while implicit bias is often connected to race or ethnicity, it is plausible that implicit bias can be related to a teacher's belief about students in special education. While students with disabilities must adhere to the same rules and are subjected to the same disciplinary practices as their non-disabled peers, when applying disciplinary consequences, the student's disability must be taken into consideration (Williams, 2016). Williams (2013) proposes that the disproportionate exclusion of students with disabilities may be a modern way to segregate students who are perceived as not fitting with the school norms. Williams proposes that “disproportionality may arise when administrators consciously or unconsciously allow assumptions about certain groups of students to color how they view misbehavior” (Williams, 2016, p.2).

The Intersection of Color and Disability

Data indicates that Black students with disabilities have 2.8 times greater risk than their White peers of being suspended or expelled (Skiba, et al., 2013). Black students with Other Health Impairment (OHI) and Specific Learning Disability (SLD) were specifically noted as having disproportionate suspension (Krezmien, et al, 2006). In examining predictors of exclusionary practices, the risk was for students who “had Emotional Disability (ED) or OHI due to attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), were Black, older, male, had low SES, or attended urban schools,” (Sullivan et al., 2014, p.200). Furthermore, a third of all students

identified as ED were twice as likely to have been suspended multiple times (Sullivan et al., 2014).

In the last decade, evidence supports an obvious connection between school suspension and the juvenile justice system. This connection, known as the school-to-prison pipeline is most prevalent for Black students with disabilities. Studies report that though only 19% of all special education students were Black, 50% of black students in correctional facilities have disabilities (Losen et al., 2014).

Predominantly Black Schools

While there appears “to be a high rate of inconsistency in the application of school suspension” (Skiba et al., 2009, p. 3), schools with a higher percentage of Black students have higher suspension rates (Skiba, 2009). Schools that have a majority Black student population also share other variables that are consistent. “For instance, teachers of color are disproportionately employed in hard-to-staff schools, which also enroll a disproportionate share of students of color” (Lindsay & Hart, 2017, para 11). Research supports that predominantly Black schools have lower academic achievement, higher rates of suspension and greater number of teachers teaching on alternate waivers or out of their licensed content area. Schools with majority Black student enrollment have higher poverty rates and are noted to have an average 68% graduation rate. Majority Black schools are also more likely to have a greater security presence than mental health supports. According to Kelly (2010), “predominately Black schools do have poor behavioral climates” (p. 1248) noting that teachers are more focused on maintaining classroom order and thus divert their attention from providing quality instruction. Teachers attempting to maintain classroom control were more likely to provide students with

worksheets than engage them in interactive group discussions or meet their individual learning needs (Kelly, 2010).

In examining various articles, the theory of promoting ethnic match between teacher and student surfaced. The theory suggests that if teachers look like their students, their students may better identify and have lower disciplinary offenses and higher student achievement. As stated earlier, MCSD closely mirrors the student population and yet continues to have high suspension rates and low student achievement. Lindsay and Hart (2017) explored exposure of Black students to Black teachers. In their study, they noted that Black students experienced modest but lower disciplinary rates when they were matched with teachers of the same race regardless of grade levels. However, this was not the case when the student population became more than two-thirds minority. It is interesting to note that in a different study conducted by Bradshaw et al. (2010), ethnic match between student and teacher did not reduce the risk for ODRs for Black students. Black male students with Black teachers had a higher likelihood (28%) of receiving an “ODR than any other student,” (Bradshaw et.al, 2010, p.514) particularly an ODR for a major infraction.

Overall, the practice of ethnic matching, such as hiring teachers and or administrators to mirror student enrollment, is not a reliable method to solve disproportionality (Bradshaw, 2010). Maple Cove School District is an example of such with an approximate 2,900 student population consisting of 96.9% Black/African American, 1% Hispanic, 1.2% White and .9% Other according to data gained from myschoolinfo.org. for 2019-2020. MCSD’s teacher population consists of 93% Black/African American, 7% White and a building level administration that is 100% Black/African American.

Four factors were considered when looking at school risk and suspension rates: 1) urbanicity or urban location (large city), 2) percentage of students who qualify for free or reduced-price lunches (poverty), 3) racial composition and 4) enrollment. It is important to note that only one school demographic provided a significant predictor of suspension rates: “Schools with high Black enrollment tended to suspend more White students and more Black students and tend to have greater suspension gaps” (Gregory, 2011, p. 23). The study notes that the findings call for greater research to investigate school climate, student behavior and discipline practices in schools with high Black enrollment. Maple Cove School District provides just the environment to facilitate such research.

Impact of Exclusionary Practices on Schools

Research has cited the ineffectiveness of exclusionary practices as a deterrent to undesired behavior (Costenbader & Marson, 1998), noting that exclusionary practices lead to lost instruction time, student disengagement from school, higher dropout rates and greater potential of students entering the juvenile justice system. When students are not in school, they are either at home or on the streets. These scenarios can lend themselves to higher criminal activity and increased likelihood of seeing violent activity (OCR, 2019).

Though schools often cite safety and protection of other students and staff for utilizing exclusionary practices, only 5% of exclusionary practices are related to violence or student safety issues (Beyond Suspension, 2019). Some schools may even use suspension to get rid of “perceived troublemakers” (Skiba, 2008). This practice comes at a great cost not only for the offending student but for the overall school climate and culture. Removing students at any level fuels “a chain reaction of school disengagement, further suspensions, school failure and dropout and eventual incarceration” (Williams, 2016, p.8). Furthermore, excluding disruptive students

does not improve the school climate in “schools with higher rates of suspension” (Skiba & Sprague, 2008). In a 1998 survey by Costenbader and Markson, results reported that middle school students who were suspended had greater feelings of distrust and “anger toward the suspending adult” (as cited in Vincent, 2012, p.587).

Exclusionary practices can also have negative effects of the overall perception of school culture by non-offending students. When students perceive that there are unjust practices regarding the treatment of their peers, they are less likely to have a positive connection to the school (Gregory & Ripski, 2008; Shirley & Cornell, 2014). Even after accounting for student demographics, schools with higher suspension rates have lower achievement, and rank lower on perception of school safety.

Culture and Characteristics

One argument is that disproportionality has less to do with student behaviors and more to do with school culture and policies (Losen & Martinez, 2013). As part of the 2014 *Dear Colleague Letter*, schools have been urged to “make deliberate efforts to improve school climate,” (Konold et al., 2017, p. 1289). How a school goes about accomplishing that task depends upon the students they serve and those students’ needs. While substantial research exists on the impact of racial composition and student achievement, little research exists on the instructional practices that occur in these classrooms. According to Skiba (2014) one predictor of improved student behavior and school climate is interventions that improve quality instruction.

Another theory continually threaded through multiple studies was the benefit that authoritative structure has not only on impacting student behavior but also to student engagement levels. The authoritative model is based upon Diana Baumrind’s work in 1968 around parenting

styles. Baumrind found that parents who were equally demanding and supportive were more effective (Baumrind, 1968). Authoritative discipline theory centers around a learning environment that is highly supportive and highly structured with academic and behavioral expectations. Applied to schools, authoritative structure presents itself as teachers who are caring and respectful or who are deemed warm demanders. These teachers set high expectations for students but also surround their students with supports to be successful. Schools with higher authoritative structure as determined by the Authoritative School Climate survey, reported having lower suspension rates (Konold et al., 2017) and higher cognitive engagement for both Black and White students (Cornell et al., 2016).

Located in high urbanicity and a violent crime rate which is 369% higher than the national average, Maple Cove School District parents are well aware of the danger in the community. This awareness manifests in their parenting styles. In *Parental Influences on Academic Performance in African American Students*, Taylor et al. (1995) suggests studies show many African American parents have more of an authoritarian parenting style (rigid control and high expectations) due to the need to protect their child from life in the ghetto.

Positive trusting relationships are also noted as a factor for decreasing negative disciplinary encounters for Black students (Gregory & Ripski, 2008). Students are more likely to adhere to classroom and school rules when they feel they are treated with respect by their teachers and their administrators (Shirley & Cornell, 2011). Using culturally responsive teaching is one way to minimize the disconnect between teacher and student. Taking the time to not only learn but seeking to understand the student's culture assists teachers in forming deeper connections with their students.

Conceptual Framework

From 1993 until 2003, the researcher served as a teacher of special education in predominantly White districts. During that time, I noted that students with disabilities often received Office Disciplinary Referrals (ODRs) for behaviors that were directly related to their disability. I have spent hours in Manifestation Determination Review (MDR) conferences with teachers who expressed “concern” about students with disabilities being served in their classrooms, often stating that the general education classroom was not conducive to their learning or their behaviors. The display of concern was even greater when students were identified as having ED or OHI.

In 2008, my role changed to that of school administrator. Still serving in predominantly White districts, I had no experience with racial disproportionality. In 2019, I became assistant superintendent of secondary education in Maple Cove School District, a predominantly Black district. Due to the new requirements relating to calculating disproportionality, Maple Cove School District triggered for having significant disproportionality of discipline of students of color with disabilities. While striving to gain greater understanding of discipline disproportionality of minority students, I found little research on predominantly Black schools.

As the direct supervisor of secondary education, there are three areas that I believe are impacting disproportionality of Black students with disabilities: teacher effectiveness, implicit bias towards students with disabilities and a lack of shared behavioral expectations.

Teacher Effectiveness

Like many schools across the state, recruiting licensed teachers in the area of mathematics, science and special education has been challenging for the Maple Cove School District. In order to fill vacancies, MCSD filed for a waiver with the Arkansas Department of

Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) which granted the district permission to hire individuals to serve on Act 1240 waivers. Individuals on Act 1240 waivers must have a bachelor's degree and a minimum of 18 hours in the area of content for which they would be teaching. The individual has up to three years to take and pass the Praxis specific to their content area, which then makes them eligible for a standard teaching license. The waiver has specific requirements for content coursework; however, it does not have minimum requirements for pedagogical coursework. During the 2019-2020 school year, 21% of Maple Cove School District's teaching staff served under an Act 1240 waiver.

While content knowledge is important, pedagogy (the method and practice of teaching) brings life to the content and allows the teacher to tailor learning to each student. Often confused with curriculum (what is taught), pedagogy takes theories of learning and connects them to the curriculum in order that the student experiences meaningful learning (Persaud, 2019). How a teacher delivers the content while connecting with the student on an individual level is an important factor in student engagement. According to the research of Susan Entz (2006):

It is through pedagogy, the science of teaching, that the skillful teacher ties these elements together. The ways in which a teacher interacts with students and organizes instruction are critically important aspects of helping each child learn (p. 10).

When teachers have content knowledge, but lack a foundational understanding of pedagogy, developing lessons that can connect with each learner can not only be challenging, but it can also hinder student engagement. This barrier lends itself to students being off task and more likely to engage in misbehavior.

Novice teachers report difficulty with “the increased demands of teaching special needs students” (Fournier, 2012, p.2). Effective instruction for students with disabilities

requires that the teacher have knowledge of the student's Individual Education Program or IEP. The student's IEP provides the teacher with critical information to meet the student's needs within the classroom. The IEP contains the student's needed academic accommodations, such as: extended time to complete reading assignments, notes to assist the student with content and vocabulary and seating to best assist the student in the classroom. The IEP also contains information about the student's present level of academic achievement and functional performance. This information assists in developing lessons that are engaging without being at a learning frustration level for students with disabilities. The IEP also informs the teacher if the student has a Behavior Intervention Plan (BIP). The IEP provides the regular education teacher with a comprehensive profile of the student's needs.

When students' academic needs are too low or too high, an atmosphere of frustration can be created, potentially resulting in student disengagement or inappropriate classroom behavior. ADHD Weekly (Aug. 2019) reports that "one in three students with ADHD" (para.1), do not receive the accommodations noted in their IEP. Surprisingly, not only did students not receive academic accommodations, but they did also not receive accommodations specific to assisting them with behavioral issues. Even when social behaviors of students are noted as needing interventions, they were often "mistaken for willful behavior or lack of personal motivation" (ADHD Weekly, 2019, para. 9).

Implicit Bias

While not the focus of this study, Maple Cove School District also triggered in Least Restrictive Environment (LRE), having a high percentage of students served off campus by a third-party vendor. Though teachers and administrators may not recognize they have an implicit

bias, in examining previous practices of the district, it was common practice to place students that were noted as having extreme behavioral needs in day treatment centers, as they were viewed as being too challenging to serve. Also, the predominant practice is to serve students in resources classes as opposed to the general education classroom with support.

Implicit bias is “the stereotypes and attitudes that occur unconsciously and may or may not reflect our actual attitudes” (Gullo et al., 2019, pg. 19). Implicit bias can take many forms: the assumption that your nurse will be a female, your doctor a male, the belief that all students from poverty have disengaged parents, or that students with disabilities are more challenging in the classroom. Teachers’ beliefs of their students’ academic or behavioral abilities can often lead to self-fulfilling prophecies.

According to Rist (2000), the impact of teacher expectation on student outcomes was researched as early as 1970. The study examined how teachers use positive reinforcement based upon the teacher’s belief of the students’ ability levels. When teachers perceived that their students were either slow or quick learners, students behaved accordingly. While this work focused primarily on academic achievement, the concept of implicit bias of behavior of students is not far removed.

Behavioral Expectations

MCSD does have an explicit policy related to student behavior and student consequences, however, there is no shared behavioral expectation or tiered system of interventions. Classroom teachers do not implement consistent behavioral expectations for students, resulting in inconsistent disciplinary practices in their classrooms. There is no system to provide structured support for students who may need emotional or behavioral support.

The lack of a tiered system of behavioral expectations coupled with teachers' lack of knowledge of students' BIP has created noted issues at MCSD. Principals report that teachers often write ODRs for students that are counter to the student's BIP. Although the special education department documents having provided teachers with copies of BIPs, teachers insist that they rarely receive a copy and therefore are unsure what they should be doing to support students. A few teachers have expressed concern having students with disabilities in their classroom, noting that students were not only difficult to serve academically, but they often distract others from instruction due to their challenging behaviors.

Figure 2 below provides a visual representation of how the three areas of concern create an environment which allows for the disproportionality of students of color with disabilities.

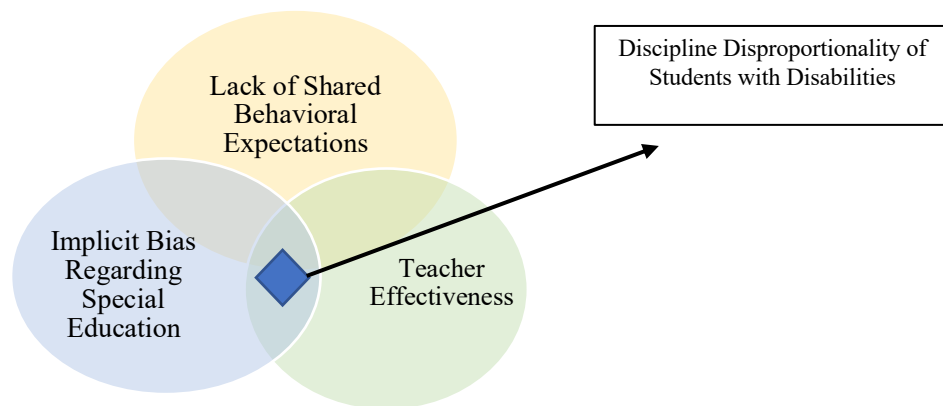


Figure 2. Conceptual Framework

Summary

The purpose of this study is to examine the problem of practice found in discipline disproportionality of Black students with disabilities in an urban high school with a majority Black student and teacher population. This literature review was completed to assist the researcher in better understanding the potential root causes of discipline disproportionality of

Black students with disabilities and includes: IDEA and Significant Disproportionality, Exclusionary Practices in Black Students, and Students with Disabilities, The Intersection of Color and Disability, Predominantly Black Schools, and the Impact of Exclusionary Practices on Schools to include Culture and Characteristics. This chapter also included a conceptual framework to assist in understanding the problem of practice of discipline disproportionality of Black students with disabilities. Chapter Three will outline the methodology utilized in this problem of practice and will provide a rationale for this study and details to explore potential answers to the research questions.

Chapter Three – Inquiry Methods

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to examine the problem of practice found in discipline disproportionality of Black students with disabilities in an urban school district with a majority Black student, teacher and building administrator population. The researcher utilized a case study qualitative inquiry approach in order to gain deeper insight from administrators at each educational level within Maple Cove School District regarding their experiences with discipline disproportionality within a majority Black school district.

Quantitative data was collected first and consisted of student discipline data accessed through state and local digital platforms. Due to the researcher's role within the district, teacher data as it pertains to absenteeism and licensure was also collected. Data was disaggregated, analyzed and used to assist in determining how to move forward with qualitative inquiry.

In this study, a case study qualitative inquiry approach was taken. Using data-coded interviews, the researcher took a phenomenological approach to gain understanding of potential root causes of discipline disproportionality in Maple Cove School District. Examining both quantitative and qualitative data allowed the researcher to triangulate data and determine the extent of discipline disparity between students with disabilities and their non-disabled peers. The guiding research questions for this study are:

1. How do Office Discipline Referrals (ODRs) differ between students with and without disabilities?
2. From the principal's perspective, what factors influence why students with disabilities receive Office Discipline Referrals in a majority Black school?
3. From the principal's perspective, what factors impact the disciplinary decisions made by building level administrators in regard to students with disabilities?

4. What current policies or practices create benefits or barriers to meeting the needs of students with disabilities?

Exploring these four questions provided the researcher with deeper knowledge of potential factors that impact discipline disproportionality in a majority Black school district in southern Arkansas.

This chapter includes the researcher's rationale, problem setting/context, research sample and data resources, data collection methods, data analysis methods, trustworthiness, and limitations/delimitations. This chapter also includes a summary of the methodology to conduct the study of discipline disproportionality in an urban school district with majority Black students and teachers.

Rationale

Disproportionality occurs when a higher number of students with disabilities are removed from their learning environment. In Maple Cove School District, only administrators (principals or assistant principals) can remove a student from their learning environment by assigning In School Suspension (ISS), Out of School Suspension (OSS) or by making a recommendation for Expulsion. Although there are occasions when an administrator initiates disciplinary action, most of the time disciplinary actions originate with the classroom teacher. Office Disciplinary Referrals (ODRs) are a result of behaviors (actual or perceived) which occur in the classroom, hallway or other area and are deemed inappropriate or unacceptable. When a teacher assigns an ODR, there is potential for the student to then receive disciplinary action from an administrator, which may result in ISS, OSS or Expulsion.

Constructionist theory explains how people gain understanding or knowledge from the world around them. While some teachers issue only a few ODRs, other teachers issue many.

Using a case study qualitative inquiry approach allowed the researcher to examine trends in disciplinary practices as they apply to special education students. This included not only the originating ODR, but the disciplinary consequences that administrators chose. Through individual semi-structured interviews, the researcher was able to gain a deeper understanding of administrators' perspective on discipline disproportionality. These findings were analyzed to determine potential policy changes, needed professional development and propose adoption of programs designed to minimize exclusionary practices.

Problem Setting/Context

This study occurred in Maple Cove School District (MCSD) which is in an urban city in southern Arkansas. In 2018-2019 MCSD consisted of four elementary schools, one middle school and one high school. The city has a population size of 42,984. According to the state informational site, myschoolinfo.arkansas.gov, Maple Cove School District serves students in grades K-12 with a student enrollment of approximately 3,189 based on the 3rd quarter Average Daily Membership (ADM) for the 2018-2019 school year. Of those students, 96.5% were Black, .9% Hispanic and 1.6% White. With a poverty level of 78%, all students enrolled in MCSD qualified for free and reduced lunch.

In September 2018, Maple Cove School District was placed in Level 5 support by the Arkansas Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) due to the district's academic and fiscal distress designation. This designation occurs when a district experiences a substantial fiscal decline and "49.5 percent or less of its students test 'proficient' or 'advanced' on state mandated math and reading exams over the three previous years" (Arkansas Code § 6-15-424 and § 6-15-431). For the last three consecutive years, MCSD received ratings based on

the Elementary Secondary Education Act (ESSA) that resulted in the school being classified as being in academic distress.

Although still under state fiscal control, MCSD ended the 2019 fiscal year able to maintain salary and maintenance of operations. The ability to reduce debt was largely due to downsizing the district through closing Forest Elementary School (K-1), absorbing the K-1 students in the remaining elementary schools and an extensive Reduction in Force (RIF) process. Since Forest Elementary School closed, only the remaining elementary schools, middle school and high school will be included in the study. Current enrollment numbers for the 2019-2020 School year reflect: North Pine Elementary (503), Cypress Elementary (270), Willow Elementary (498), Oakwood Middle School (719), and Maple Cove High School (908).

In examining disproportionality, research indicates that implicit bias is noted as one factor for high rates of discipline referrals (Rudd, 2014). Maple Cove School District consists of 241 teachers and 12 administrators. Of the employees who serve at Maple Cove School District, with the exception of 7% of White teachers and two White assistant superintendents, all employees are Black. In 2017-2018 there were noted 3,310 incidents of Out-of-School Suspension (OSS), 12 Expulsions (EXPs) and 3,322 Exclusionary Disciplinary Actions (EDAs) also known as In-School-Suspension. The 2018-2019 school year noted 3,119 incidents of OSS, 27 EXPs and 3,146 EDAs. Although there was a noted decline between years, special education students accounted for 39% of all OSS disciplinary actions in 2017-2018 and 38% in 2018-2019.

In the summer of 2019, Maple Cove School District contracted with consulting company, Solution Tree and has begun the implementation of collaborative teams. There are currently four collaborative teams within the district that work exclusively to examine disciplinary data. Maple Cove School District does not have a formal Positive Behavioral Intervention System (PBIS) in

place; however, the disciplinary teams are in the process of creating Behavioral Tiers and interventions for students.

Teachers' educational backgrounds, rating of effectiveness as based upon Teacher Excellence Support System (TESS), Arkansas' method for teacher evaluation, and years of experience vary greatly in Maple Cove School District. It is the researcher's belief that implicit bias towards serving students in special education, teacher effectiveness as it relates to implementation of students' Individual Education Program (IEP) and the lack of shared behavioral expectations between teachers impacts ODRs which result in disproportionality.

Overall, sixty-three positions were lost to either RIF or attrition. While this is a positive step in exiting the district from fiscal distress status, MCSD must substantially raise student achievement. Minimizing lost instructional time due to students being removed from their learning environment is critical in achieving that goal.

Research Sample and Data Sources

In order to more deeply understand the problem of practice, individual interviews with each building level administrator were conducted. Administrators were interviewed on a voluntary basis and each participant was asked to sign a consent form which complied to the Institutional Review Board (IRB) and federal guidelines. No monetary compensation was given for participating in the study. All administrators, including assistant principals were invited to participate. Prior to the interviews, administrators were asked to complete a demographic form which collected information on their age, gender, educational levels, total years of experience, and experience within the district. Once the study was completed, data was displayed in a table that reflected administrator characteristics.

Since the researcher serves as the district's assistant superintendent, and the district is currently identified as having significant disproportionality, it was critical that participants understood the purpose of the study was to gain greater understanding of root causes of discipline disproportionality. They also needed to be aware that knowledge gained would be used to assist them in addressing disparity on their campus and across the district. Knowledge gained through the interviews was used to assist the researcher in recommending and designing needed professional development for teachers and administrators. Results from this study were shared with all participants, the Maple Cove Superintendent of Schools and DESE.

Data Collection Methods

Office Discipline Referrals were reviewed by the researcher using SmartData Dashboard, a digital platform that collects information from eSchool, the state data-collection system. SmartData Dashboard allowed the researcher to pull specific information from eSchool and filter it as it related to disproportionality. For the purpose of this study, students on 504 plans were not included. SmartData Dashboard allowed the researcher to filter where a student had multiple incidents of discipline. Since the researcher is employed by the Maple Cove School District, access to student data was readily accessible without special permission from DESE.

Data from myschoolinfo.org was included to provide the researcher with a full picture of the characteristics of each school. This data included grades served, ethnicity breakdowns, average class size, percentage of students receiving free/reduced lunch, percentage of students eligible to receive special education services, average years of teaching experience and the current letter grade based upon the school's overall performance. Teacher ethnicity and percentage of teachers serving on alternative, provisional license, and 1240 waivers was collected through Maple Cove Human Resource office.

Interviews

Qualitative data was collected through private individual interviews with Maple Cove School District administrators. For the purpose of this study, an administrator is defined as either a head principal or an assistant principal. All principals in Maple Cove School District were extended a letter of invitation to participate, which included a narrative on the purpose of the study. Participation in the study was completely voluntary. Individual interviews were conducted with administrators from each educational level. Interviews were conducted privately via ZOOM due to the constraints of COVID-19 and were scheduled to last no longer than 90 minutes. Before each interview began, the researcher shared again the purpose of the study and participants were notified that they could withdraw from the interview at any time.

Qualitative data was collected through semi-structured interviews that were focused on 11 open ended questions which can be found in Appendix A. Interview questions were designed to gain insight about principals' perceptions of root causes regarding discipline disproportionality; specifically factors which may contribute to Black students with disabilities having a higher risk ratio for exclusionary practices than their non-disabled peers. Qualitative data collected from principal interviews were open coded, then a second round of coding occurred to determine similarities in responses.

Data Analysis Methods

This study utilized a case study qualitative inquiry approach, in which data collected were triangulated in order to ensure validity and trustworthiness. As part of the analysis, discipline data was categorized into discipline referrals from teachers and administrators, special education and non-special education students and by race. In addition, teacher absenteeism data was also analyzed.

Qualitative methods were chosen to provide the researcher with perceptual information from administrators to determine their beliefs regarding discipline disproportionality. Interviews with administrators were transcribed and opening coding conducted. Codes were bulleted in sequential order in an Excel document and participants were organized by building level. This open coding process was shared with a member check (respondent validation). A color-coded system was used to assist the researcher in quickly identifying common themes and concepts. Concepts were then grouped, and subcategories emerged. These subcategories were analyzed through the lens of various theoretical models resulting in identification of core concepts that appear to be root causes of discipline disproportionality.

Trustworthiness

The first step to ensure trustworthiness of the study was to protect the confidentiality of the principals who participated. All data were collected and housed in a personal database not owned by the school district. Prior to the study, principals were invited to participate and notified that their participation was completely voluntary. Before each interview, principals were reminded that at any time they could stop the interview or choose to withdraw from the study. Once the interview was completed, the researcher provided participants the opportunity to review their personal transcribed interview and provide feedback for clarity and accuracy. During the course of the interviews, the researcher asked principals clarifying questions to avoid misrepresenting their views.

Since ODRs could be attributed to lack of cultural competency, lack of teacher effectiveness or implicit bias related to special education, it was critical for the researcher to facilitate a safe interview environment that set the tone for information gathering. A pseudonym was assigned for the district, each school in the district and principals. This allowed the

participants to share sensitive information regarding their beliefs. This protected not only the participants, but also the researcher's position within the district.

Different methods of triangulation were utilized to ensure validity of the study. Ravitch and Carl (2016) impress the need to examine data from multiple perspectives in order to answer research questions. Principals from each grade span were included to provide perspectives that may differ from working with different developmental age categories. Multiple methods of data were also utilized to determine the answers to the research questions. In this study, discipline data was collected and interviews with principals were conducted. Both were analyzed and compared to discipline data to ensure validity.

Validity of research can be impacted by the bias of the researcher and the participants of the research. To ensure that the researcher's bias did not influence coding practices, the researcher relied on the guidance of the dissertation committee and verify that all protocols approved by the University of Arkansas Internal Review Board were adhered to with fidelity. Dialogic engagement with the researcher's committee chair occurred approximately every two weeks. This allowed the researcher to talk through various beliefs regarding data collected, revealing potential bias and minimizing influence on the results of the study.

Structured reflective practice was also used to secure validity of the study. The researcher maintained a journal of personal thoughts related to the study and data collection process. This allowed the researcher to keep personal opinions separate from actual data that had been collected, which allowed concepts that emerged from interviews to be unbiased.

Limitations and Delimitations

The researcher selected a case study qualitative inquiry approach to gain greater knowledge of potential root causes impacting discipline disparity between students with and

without disabilities. Identifying the limitations within this study allowed the researcher to consider ways to safeguard data collection and the impact on the findings. In examining the use of historical discipline data, one prevalent limitation was skewed disciplinary data.

Administrators input ODRs that result in ISS, OSS or Expulsion, under their name instead of the referring teacher's name. This minimized the researcher's ability to efficiently track ODRs back to their origin. In order to compensate, physical files had to be reviewed and data collected from random samples of student disciplinary files.

The critical component in determining root causes came from the data gathered from personal interviews with principals. This data piece was invaluable because it provided the researcher with insight on themes and practices that are not observable through examining ODRs. Principals in Maple Cove School District are aware of the District's commitment to providing equity and modeling professional behavior to students. Ensuring participants felt comfortable to be fully honest in their answers while being interviewed was another limitation. To combat any limitation that could occur due to researcher interpretation of the interviews, principals were provided a copy of their interview transcript. They were allowed to make any corrections, retract any comment, and clarify any answer they felt needed explanation. The researcher's role in supporting special education services may also have an effect on the interpretation of codes and core concepts. A final limitation was the impact of COVID-19 on the current school year. Due to COVID-19, 68% of all students within the district are virtual learners, meaning that they do not physically attend school on campus. With less than 40% of students being physically present on campus, ODRs are almost non-existent this school year. With such a dramatic decline in behavioral incidents, it would have been ineffective to use discipline data from the 2020-2021 school year.

One delimitation of this study was the limited number of principals in the district. To compensate, assistant principals were included in the study. This decision was important since assistant principals are often the individuals who address disciplinary issues within schools. While interviewing other principals who serve in schools identified as having discipline disproportionality could have provided additional data, information gathered from them would not have provided root causes specific to Maple Cove School District.

Summary

To ensure students receive a quality education, we must first provide access to the learning environment. This cannot occur when students are consistently removed from the classroom setting through exclusionary practices. Although there are incidents of extreme behaviors that result in ISS, OSS or Expulsion, those generally constitute only 5% of all classroom removals. If only 5% of incidents are deemed violent and therefore necessitate removal of students, why are the exclusionary practices of ISS, OSS so prevalently used? We must seek ways to keep students, particularly students with disabilities, in the classroom. To do so, we must examine what factors impact the likelihood of discipline disproportionality.

This study was designed to gain deep insight and knowledge from building level administrators. Qualitative data was collected through personal interviews with principals, determining root causes that impact the disparity of discipline between students with and without disabilities. Quantitative data was collected through state and local digital systems which allowed for the disaggregation of data by disciplinary infractions, various characteristics of teachers (absenteeism rates, those serving on waivers and ALPs, etc.), and rates of suspension. The findings of this study provided the researcher with root causes that impact discipline disproportionality.

Chapter Four – Analysis and Results

Introduction of Findings

This chapter presents the findings from a case study qualitative inquiry approach, utilizing interviews from building level administrators, data retrieved from SmartData Dashboard related to office disciplinary referrals, and state reported discipline demographics as they relate to the problem of practice found in discipline disproportionality of Black students with disabilities in an urban school district with majority Black student and teacher populations. James Stronge's theory (2018) which identifies the six qualities of effective teachers coupled with Charlotte Danielson's Framework (2007) for effective teaching served as the primary conceptual lens for examining the characteristics of an effective teacher. Diana Baumrind's theory (1968) of parenting style (from the lens of the school setting) and its impact on student behavior also informed this analysis. Theories on Multi-tiered System of Support (MTSS) was also taken into consideration. Four research questions drove the data gathering and analysis:

1. How do Office Discipline Referrals (ODRs) differ between students with and without disabilities?
2. From the principal's perspective, what factors influence why students with disabilities receive Office Discipline Referrals in a majority Black school?
3. From the principal's perspective, what factors impact the disciplinary decisions made by building level administrators, in regard to students with disabilities?
4. What current policies or practices create benefits or barriers to meeting the needs of students with disabilities?

This study was conducted during the COVID -19 pandemic (Spring of 2021). Like many Arkansas school districts, Maple Cove School District (MCSD) provided families the option for

their children to be served on campus or to be served from home through a virtual platform. During the time of this study, 68% - 72% of students in MCSD were virtual students. As a result, there was a significant decline in office discipline referrals. Due to the noted anomaly, disciplinary data from the 2018-2019 and 2019-2020 school year was used as the focus of this problem of practice.

Presentation of Descriptive Statistics from Survey Responses

With the exception of one, all principals and assistant principals interviewed in the study have lived in the Maple Cove Community for over 30 years. The majority of administrators are between the ages of 49 and 55 years, with one 72-year-old assistant principal being the outlier. Their range in administrative experience is 1 to 17 years. While one administrator was in her first year as a building level leader, she had previously served as a Lead Teacher within her building for two years. All administrators are fully licensed; four have master's degrees, four have specialist's degrees and one has a doctorate. Their experience with earning their advanced degrees range from courses taken solely online to learning fully on campus. All administrators interviewed are African American. All elementary and high school administrators within the district willingly agreed to participate in the study. The Oakwood Junior High Principal agreed to participate, however, his two assistant principals respectfully declined. Due to the constraints of COVID-19, all administrators were interviewed via Zoom, after which they were provided a transcript of their interview to approve as a member check. Information is displayed to represent administrators and assistant administrators.

Table 2
Characteristics of Administrators 2020-2021

	North Pine	Cypress	Willow	Oakwood JH	MCHS
Head Administrators					
Years in Education	22	27	27	24	24
Years as Admin	8	1	9	17	5
Educational Level	MA	MA	Ed. S	Ed. S	MA
Resides in Community	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Years in Community	32 years	51 years	49 years	47 years	32 years
Age	50	51	49	51	52
Gender	M	F	F	M	F
Race	B	B	B	B	B
Assistant Administrators					
	North Pine	Willow	MCHS #1	MCHS #2	
Years in Education	30	28	17	32	
Years as Admin	10	10	9	7	
Educational Level	MA	Ed. S.	Ed. S.	Ed. D	
Resides in Community	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	
Years in Community	30 years	31 years	49 years	0 years	
Age	72	49	49	55	
Gender	F	F	M	M	
Race	B	B	B	B	

Presentation of School Level Demographic Data

Like many districts across the state, Maple Cove School District has experienced declining enrollment for multiple years. In 2018-2019, MCSD consisted of one pre-school and four elementary schools. At the end of the 2018-2019 school year, Forest Elementary closed. Students from Forest Elementary were divided between two schools, North Pine Elementary and Willow Elementary. The principal of Willow resigned and the principal of Forest Elementary was reassigned to serve at Willow Elementary. At that time, it was determined that North Pine Elementary, Cypress Elementary and Willow Elementary would change their grade configuration to include all students in Kindergarten – Fifth Grade.

Each school is predominantly Black with an average elementary poverty level of 90% and an average secondary poverty level of 80%. With the exception of Cypress Elementary School, the number of students eligible to receive special education services decreased from the 2018-2019 to the 2019-2020 school year. However, only North Pine and Willow Elementary were below the Arkansas state average (13.4%) for students receiving special education services. During 2019-2020, Maple Cove School District reported the average years of teaching experience as 14.83 years. On the surface it would appear that the majority of teachers in MCSD are in the prime of their careers. However, upon deeper examination, 18% of teachers in the district are considered Novice (having 3 or less years of teaching experience), while 38% of teachers have 25 or greater years teaching experience.

Maple Cove School District was placed in Level Five Support in the fall of 2018 due to fiscal and academic distress. All elementary schools and the high school received a rating of F; the middle school received a rating of D. Due to the pandemic, schools were not required to

administer the state assessment in the spring of 2020, therefore school ratings were frozen until the next administration of state assessment, expected in the spring of 2021.

Table 3
School Characteristics 2018-2019

	Forest	North Pine	Cypress	Willow	Oakwood	Maple Cove
Grades served	K-1	1-5	1-5	2-5	6 th -8 th	9 th -12 th
Total students	297	413	370	341	752	1,016
Black	95.9%	98.2%	96.4%	94.9%	95.9%	96.7%
White	2.4%	.7%	1.1%	2.1%	1.6%	1.8%
Hispanic	0%	.7%	1.9%	.9%	1.1%	.9%
Other	1.7%	.2%	.6%	2.1%	1.4%	.6%
Average Class Size	16	18	16	18	16	14
Free/Reduced Lunch	91%	91%	94%	85%	82%	78%
Students Eligible to Receive Special Education	3%	13%	12%	14%	17%	17%
Average Years of Experience	17.04	15.79	17.61	10.30	15.32	13.15
School Letter Grade	D	F	F	F	D	F

Table 4
School Characteristics 2019-2020

	North Pine	Cypress	Willow	Oakwood	Maple Cove
Grades served	K-5	K-5	K-5	6 th -8th	9 th -12th
Total students	54	290	502	722	903
Black	97.4%	96.2%	96.8%	96.8%	96.7%
White	.8%	1.7%	1.2%	.6%	1.9%
Hispanic	1.4%	0.0%	.8%	1.4%	1.0%
Other	.4%	2.1%	1.2%	.5%	.4%
Average Class Size	19	13	19	16	13
Free/Reduced Lunch	91%	94%	91%	82%	78%
Students Eligible to Receive Special Education	9%	14%	12%	16%	16%
Average Years of Experience	16.60	17.08	14.92	13.07	12.46
School Letter Grade	F	F	F	D	F

Note. School Letter Grade frozen due to pandemic

The Arkansas Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) provides public access to school information including disciplinary data through myschoolinfo.org and is reported by actions per 100 students. Although the data is not disaggregated by individual students, it does provide an initial level of information on discipline disproportionality. One area of weakness is that the data do not consider when there are multiple incidents from the same student. Table 3 contains information comparing disciplinary action between All students and students identified as receiving special education services.

While the majority of schools displayed less discipline rates for students with disabilities as compared to all students in 2018-2019, the difference is minimal. Expulsion for students served in special education is noted at zero across the board, however, the use of In-School-Suspension (ISS) was equal or higher in all schools. Discipline rates declined for all schools during the 2019-2020 school year. With the exception of Cypress Elementary, all schools noted lower discipline rates for students receiving special education services, however once again the difference is minimal.

Table 5
Discipline Rates (Actions per 100 Students for 2018-2019)

	Forest		North Pine		Cypress		Willow		Oakwood		MCHS	
	All	SPED	All	SPED	All	SPED	All	SPED	All	SPED	All	SPED
OSS	9	17	40	35	20	20	14	13	58	52	42	45
EXP	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	2	0
EDA	9	17	40	35	20	20	14	13	60	52	43	45
ISS	9	39	30	30	2	2	22	16	24	24	42	45

Note. OSS= Out-of-School Suspension, EXP = Expulsion, EDA = Exclusionary Discipline Action, ISS = In-School Suspension. All elementary schools reported fewer than 10 White and Hispanic students, therefore no data was reported.

	Oakwood		MCHS		
Ethnicity	AA	W	AA	H	W
OSS	59	46	41	30	60
EXP	1	0	2	0	0
EDA	60	46	43	30	60
ISS	25	23	43	20	33

Table 6*Discipline Rates (Actions per 100 Students for 2019-2020)*

	North Pine		Cypress		Willow		Oakwood		MCHS	
	All	SPED	All	SPED	All	SPED	All	SPED	All	SPED
OSS	10	5	7	8	6	6	36	30	26	25
EXP	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	1	1
EDA	10	5	7	8	6	9	36	32	27	26
ISS	16	7	7	8	13	9	31	27	28	29

Note. OSS= Out-of-School Suspension, EXP = Expulsion, EDA = Exclusionary Discipline

Action, ISS = In-School Suspension. All elementary schools reported fewer than 10 White and Hispanic students, therefore no data was reported by myschoolinfo.org.

	Oakwood		MCHS		
Ethnicity	AA	W	AA	H	W
OSS	36	N<10	27	20	17
EXP	0	N<10	1	0	0
EDA	36	N<10	27	20	17
ISS	32	N<10	28	10	39

Based on actions per 100 students, it is apparent disparities exist between “All” students and “SPED” students in each school. Again, data gathered from myschoolinfo.org does not distinguish multiple incidents of discipline from the same student

Table 7*Total Disciplinary Actions 2018-2019*

	Forest	North Pine	Cypress	Willow	Oakwood	MCHS
	Total	Total	Total	Total	Total	Total
OSS	48	337	155	62	1,566	951
EXP	0	0	0	2	11	14
EDA	48	337	155	64	1,577	965

Table 8*Total Disciplinary Actions 2019-2020*

	North Pine	Cypress	Willow	Oakwood	MCHS
	Total	Total	Total	Total	Total
OSS	69	31	45	554	382
EXP	0	0	2	2	6
EDA	69	31	45	556	388

SmartData Dashboard is a digital platform purchased by Maple Cove School District which pulls information entered by the administrator once a disciplinary action occurs from the Arkansas Public School Network (APSCN) system and disaggregates the data in a more user-friendly format. The program allows information to be reported based upon set filters and perimeters. Unlike myschoolinfo.com, SmartData dashboard provides information on unique student disciplinary infractions as opposed to reporting on incidents per 100 students. SmartData Dashboard reports a total of 3,350 students enrolled at some point in the district since the first day of school. Of those students, there is a total of 3,677 ODRs of which 1091 are from unique students. SmartData categorizes the information into the top five reasons for ODRs. For 2019-2020 a total of 3,677 ODRs were reported in Maple Cove School District. In examining ODRs per school data reflects the following: Oakwood (2,078), MCHD (1,147), Willow Elementary (211), North Pine Elementary (169) and Cypress Elementary (72).

Table 9*District Office Discipline Referrals 2019-2020*

Office Disc. Referrals		Student Category		Top 2 Ethnicity	
ODRs	Total	Gen. Ed.	Special Ed.	Afr. Am.	White
	3,677	3,238	439	3,622	29
Total Students	3,350	2,904	446	3,220	69
Unique Students	1,091	947	144	1,060	16
Percentage	32.57%	32.61%	32.29%	32.91%	23.19%

Arkansas Act 1059 (Arkansas Code, 2017) states that unless a student is a physical threat to themselves or others or is a substantial disruption to the learning environment, a K-5th grade student cannot be suspended. Given the heavy impact that suspension has on students one would think that it would be reserved for the most serious of infractions. Administrators listed the top five reasons for students being sent to the office: 1) fighting, 2) disrespect 3) refusing to work 4) talking back and 5) failing to follow directions. When asked, principals responded that the three major reasons they received referrals for what would be deemed severe were: 1) fighting, 2) inappropriate language and 3) bullying. Note that in both scenarios, administrators listed fighting as not only the top reason students are sent to the office, but also one of the three major reasons.

Table 10

Principal Perceived Percentage of Office Referrals by Category

School Levels	Severe	Moderate	Minor
Elementary	20%	30%	>50%
Secondary	10-15%	20%	>55%

Elementary leaders responded that non-disabled students were more likely to have behavioral issues which resulted in an ODR than their disabled peers. In contrast, secondary administrators noted that students with disabilities were more likely to have behavioral problems which resulted in an ODR than their non-disabled peers. According to SmartData Dashboard, the top five categories for student infractions in 2019-2020 for General Education (GE) students were: 1) insubordination, 2) disorderly conduct, 3) cutting class, 4) fighting and 5) other. The top five categories for student infractions for special education are: 1) insubordination, 2) cutting class, 3) fighting, 4) disorderly conduct and 5) tardy. While principals reported fighting at the top level, data do not support that fighting is one of the major reasons for students being referred to the Office.

In December 2020, Maple Cove School District was once again notified that the district was designated as having significant disproportionality due to having a risk ratio greater than three for three consecutive years within the same race and area of analysis. The following chart represents the data compiled by the Arkansas Division of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE). Due to the fact that Maple Cove School District lacks the required percentage of diversity of students, the risk ratio for designation is figured on comparison of the state risk ratio as opposed to the district risk ratio.

Table 11

Risk Ratio of Out of School Suspension (OSS) > 10 Days for Black Students

2015-2016	2016-2017	2017-2018	2018-2019	2019-2020
11.93	32.55	23.21	20.89	5.98

Given that Maple Cove School District is comprised of 96% African American students, there is no other ethnic group to compare risk ratio, however, Maple Cove School District is able to note risk ratio between disabled and non-disabled students. Removing the factor of race and examining disabled versus non-disabled students during 2018-2019, while there is a discrepancy between general education and special education students, with the exception of Willow Elementary at a 2.61 risk ratio and Cypress Elementary at 1.73 risk ratio, all schools fall below a 1.36 risk ratio.

Table 12

Risk Ratio per Building 2018-2019

	GE	GE # 1+ ODR	GE%	SPED	SPED # 1+ ODR	% SPED	Risk Ratio
District	3,042	1,138	37.41%	465	214	46.02%	1.23
North Pine	401	96	23.94%	37	12	32.43%	1.35
Cypress	236	34	14.41%	40	10	25%	1.73
Willow	386	39	10.10%	57	15	26.32%	2.61

Table 12 (Cont.)*Risk Ratio per Building 2018-2019*

	GE	GE # 1+ ODR	GE%	SPED	SPED # 1+ ODR	% SPED	Risk Ratio
Oakwood	691	270	39.07%	116	49	42.24%	1.08
MCHS	1,327	699	52.68%	215	128	59.53%	1.13

All schools' risk ratio declined from the 2018-2019 to the 2019-2020 school year. Four of the six schools even noted risk ratios of less than 1.0. It would be reasonable to expect a decline since schools across the state were required to move to virtual settings and did not report to a physical campus after mid-March. This change in instructional placement substantially reduced students receiving disciplinary action, however, when examining the average number of ODRs per day per month from the 2018-2019 school year, the district noted a decrease every month from August through March, with the exception of October and November prior to the impact of COVID-19.

Table 13*Risk Ratio per Building 2019-2020*

	GE	GE # 1+ ODR	GE%	SPED	SPED # 1+ ODR	% SPED	Risk Ratio
District	2,904	947	32.61%	446	144	32.29%	.99
North Pine	508	93	18.31%	64	7	10.94%	.6
Cypress	309	28	9.06%	53	7	13.21%	1.46
Willow	454	92	20.26%	68	10	10.71%	.73
Oakwood	660	399	60.45%	135	62	45.93%	.76
MCHS	818	335	40.95%	126	58	46.03%	1.12

Table 14*Average Number of ODRs per Day per Month*

Year	Aug.	Sept.	Oct.	Nov.	Dec.	Jan.	Feb.	March	April	May
18-19	10.38	27.34	20.32	16.61	21.9	14.97	19.68	10.81	15.87	8.69
19-20	8.88	24.03	25.52	16.84	8.27	13.48	17.71	7.13	NA*	NA*

NA* represents no disciplinary referrals made. This is different from 0 discipline referrals made.

Presentation of Axial Qualitative Coding

As noted in Chapter Three, this study utilized a case study qualitative inquiry approach, using historical data ascertained from state and local databases, and data collected from interviews with building level administrators. Axial coding was selected in order to analyze the data in a manner which would minimize any bias of the researcher. Axial coding “extends the analytic work from initial coding,” and is appropriate for this research as it supports studies “employing grounded theory methodology” (Saldana, 2010, p.159), such as interview transcripts. Simply stated, axial codes assist to move the work from a multitude of codes, to succinct core concepts, (Vollstedt & Rezat, 2019). The next two sections provide details regarding open and axial coding and how each were used to better understand the data collected.

Open coding

Once interviews were completed, transcriptions were thoroughly read. The researcher bulleted each response in a matrix in sequential order. Once this was completed, the researcher hand-coded the administrators responses using a color-coded system to capture commonalities in responses. The first step to open coding is to break the data into smaller, more manageable parts in order to better analyze. The goal is to then “grasp the core idea of each part and to develop a code to describe it” (Vollstedt & Rezat, 2019, p.86).

The codes focused on the building level administrators’ perceptions regarding the difference of effective and ineffective teachers, potential of implicit bias, student behaviors, and

discipline, as it relates to what impacts the disproportionality of discipline for students with disabilities. Codes were also noted on parental engagement, avoidance, and policy concerns.

The purpose of open coding is to freely allow all possible codes to emerge.

Axial codes

Axial coding seeks to “help detect relations between concepts and categories,” (Vollstedt & Rezat, 2019, p.88). Once open coding occurs, axial coding assists in narrowing the focus by bringing to light similarities which will lead themselves to a shared code. Axial coding provides the opportunity to determine relationships and ultimately a core concept to examine.

Responses from building level administrators were grouped according to emerging and reoccurring topics. From there, subcategories were determined by grouping emerging and reoccurring topics by likeness. Using literature review and theoretical concepts as the lens to examine subcategories, core concepts were determined. Table 15 reflects axial coding from interviews with building level administrators.

Table 15*Axial Coding for Interview - Qualitative Data*

Qualitative Question Posed	Emerging and Recurrent Topics Derived from Opening Coding	Subcategories	Core Concepts
What does an effective teacher look like?	Know their kids learning needs, their interests Plans for every minute of instruction, for the whole child Communicates with parents Make learning fun and relevant Procedures and routines are in place Deep understanding of content and how to “hook” their students Teach students classroom and academic expectations and hold them accountable	Have content mastery and able to provide consistent instruction Effectively communicates with students and parents Have student engagement Have classroom management skills	<i>Qualities of Effective Teachers</i> (Stronge and Danielson)
	Caring and compassionate Believes all kids can learn They are counselors, mentors - like a second parent Do what’s best for students	Build positive relationships with students and parents Communicate, teach and hold high expectations	
How does an effective teacher respond to behavior issues?	Finds root causes of behavior Correct Privately Don’t let behavior take over environment Remain calm Address behavior issues quickly Know how to de-escalate situations Kids know the teacher wants them to be successful and wants to be successful	Focus on student needs, rather than behavior while maintaining student dignity	Authoritative Environment (Warm Demanders) Create classroom environments conducive to learning (safe and engaging)
	Have engaging lessons Communicate with parents early on Relate to their students Use proximity	Proactive in planning	

Table 15 (cont.)

Axial Coding for Interview - Qualitative Data

Qualitative Question Posed	Emerging and Recurrent Topics Derived from Opening Coding	Subcategories	Core Concepts
Describe a typical disciplinary scenario, including how parental involvement impacts your decisions about disciplinary action.	Teacher initiates issue	Lack of teacher skills (instructional/behavioral)	Need for systemic change in addressing: <ul style="list-style-type: none">● Parental involvement● Teacher training Behavior Interventions
	Behavior a result of lack of structure or being left unsupervised		
	Teacher is unable to de-escalate the situation and wants student/s out of the classroom	Doesn't seek interventions to address the behavior	
	Principal talks to the student about behavior; tries to get to root cause of behavior which is often: <ul style="list-style-type: none">● Homelife● Lack of Social Skills Doesn't understand work		
	Only calls parent if student is a repeat offender, or if suspension is needed	Failure to proactively involve parents Implements avoidance tactics	
	If the parent says they will handle it, I am more lenient (K-5) Parental information doesn't come into play (6-12)		
	I have already made the decision before I call the parent		
	Principal keeps student in their office for the rest of the class period		
	May send the student home for the rest of the day (sent home)		
What factors do you consider when determining if you will suspend a student or not?	If the student has been in the office before	Repeat offenders are more likely to receive harsher consequences despite not contacting the parents before the behavior becomes a pattern.	Examination and potential revision of current student handbook
	What does policy say?		
	Is the student a safety issue?		
	If the child's behavior was because of their disability		
	K-5th 100% of K-5 building administrators consider the students homelife when considering suspending		Implementation of Multi-Tier Support System (MTSS) for Behavior to include character education.
6-12th 25% of 6-12 building administrators consider the students homelife when considering suspending			

Table 15 (cont.)

Axial Coding for Interview - Qualitative Data

Qualitative Question Posed	Emerging and Recurrent Topics Derived from Opening Coding	Subcategories	Core Concepts
Does your handbook pose any barriers/benefits when implementing discipline? How?	Limits and ties my hands No levels of interventions Too harsh Doesn't take into consideration the different needs of our students	Perceived lack of flexibility with student handbook	Examination and potential revision of current student handbook
If you could change any policy, what would you change?	More options in the handbook, instead of ISS/OSS Structured process of interventions Character education	Create a district wide system for behavior interventions	
If you could implement any one program, what would it be?	Increase student engagement through teacher training Mentors for teachers Required tutoring for students who are behind Program for behavior that reaches district wide K-12 Social Skills training for students Restorative time in the classroom Disciplining with dignity training	Program to address academic issues that impact behavior Program to address changing the behavior long term.	
Why does our district have significant disproportionality?	98% African American Large number of students who have been identified	State perimeters create the status	Additional Teacher Training <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Identification of students ● Understanding the needs of students with disabilities ● Cultural Awareness
	Teachers don't know how to modify Lack of knowledge of IEP Teachers don't want to do the extra for those students Teachers think if they let one student get away with a behavior other student will try	Perceived belief that teacher lacks skill/will in order to support students with IEPs	
	Students refuse to go to class or get kicked out because they don't want to be in special education. (9-12)	Lack of student skills creates behavior	
	Blames Student Put the focus on the behavior Use past experience, knowledge of student against the student	Lack of teacher skill	
How does an ineffective teacher respond to behavior issues?			
Why do teachers treat students differently?	Predetermined idea about the student (student's previous academic ability, behavior issues) They know the student's family	Bias	

Analysis of Axial Codes of Qualitative Data from Interview Responses

Although the interview process was semi-structured and allowed for additional probing questions to be asked, the foundation of the interview focused on 11 open ended questions found in Appendix A. From those questions, depending on the response of the individual, additional questions were asked to gain clarity or to reveal another concept which had not been anticipated. Core concepts that emerged from subcategories reflected theory and previous research that is noted in Chapter Two. Opening coding permitted data to be categorized using a color-coded system, which then allowed for the recurring topics to be more easily identified. For example, administrators who provided the following response to, “Describe an effective teacher” were color-coded as having likeness as a recurring theme: 1) plans properly 2) prepared daily and 3) plans. One core concept, “avoidance practices,” emerged not from direct responses collected, but rather the lack of response that each administrator provided. Multiple core categories emerged through the process of axial coding and are listed below.

Teacher Effectiveness Cited as a Factor

Building level administrators noted that one reason they perceived students experienced Office Discipline Referrals (ODRs) was lack of teacher effectiveness. Specifically, they noted the importance of classroom management and the teacher providing engaging lessons.

According to the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, *Beyond Suspensions*:

A teacher’s skill in classroom management and providing engaging instruction has been found to be a correlating factor when looking at rates of classroom disruption. Data suggest that as teacher-student engagement increases, misbehavior and suspensions tend to decrease. Studies reflect that teachers having less classroom management and instructional skills contributes to higher risks of students—as a whole—being suspended from school (US Civil Rights, 2019. p. 79-80).

Principals further shared that when considering which teachers needed more support than others, Novice teachers, or teachers who had changed content (possibly serving under an alternative licensure plan or ALP), were more likely to struggle.

When looking at an ODR potentially resulting in suspension, “Losen and colleagues found that the risk of suspension increased for students in all K–12 grade levels when they were taught by less-experienced and novice (i.e., new) teachers,” (US Civil Rights, 2019. p.80). With 18% of all teachers within the district considered to be Novice teachers, (having less than three years teaching experience), the building level administrators’ perceptions may be supported.

In addition to expressing that Novice teachers needed additional support and training, building level administrators stated that with the upward trend in use of technology in the classroom, they were seeing more and more teachers who were advanced in their careers struggling to use technology. According to the North Pine principal, “...veteran teachers who are near retirement,” (regarding the use of technology) were “set in their ways and don’t want to change.” Three additional administrators noted that “older” teachers often needed more support, especially in the use of engaging technology. Noting that all teachers need support, the Oakwood principal went on to say, “Novice teachers need help with classroom management; older teachers need help with technology.” Maple Cove School District reported 38% of their staff as having 25 or greater years of experience for the 2019-2020 school year. While 25 years or greater teaching experience does not necessarily equate to difficulty using technology, it does mean that 38% of teachers have had to actively seek to grow professionally in the area of technology.

Refusal to work (insubordination) was cited by 66.67% of administrators interviewed as one of the reasons a student would be likely to receive an office referral. They also noted that

the majority of the time, when they asked students why they refused to work, students would say it was because they didn't understand how to do the work. Lack of meeting the student's academic needs along with teachers leaving students unsupervised were two factors that principals credited to students having behavioral issues.

While the teacher's strength of pedagogy and content were factors principals believed impacted ODRs, the ability to construct an environment conducive to learning was not solely centered around academic skill. Principals noted that teachers who were able to connect with students on an emotional level, teachers who were perceived to be, "compassionate," "caring," "concerned," who "mentored" students, all the while communicating and holding students to set high expectations, were less likely to make an office referral. The authoritative discipline theory proposes that learning environments that demonstrate high levels of structure and support along with clearly established academic and behavioral expectations, tend to have lower suspension rates, (Konold et al., 2017). Diana Baumrind deems these types of teachers "warm demanders," (Baumrind, 1968).

Principals communicated that effective teachers were more likely to build positive relationships with students and parents, which in turn they believed allowed teachers to create classrooms environments that were more conducive to learning. Principals noted that effective teachers knew "how to de-escalate situations," and "finds root causes of behavior." Effective teachers were credited with "rarely make(ing) an office referral." Instead of sending students to the office, effective teachers "try to handle discipline in their classrooms by themselves," and were more likely to encourage students to "redirect their own behavior." The belief that a

positive teacher-student rapport assisted in securing a safe and engaging classroom resulting in students remaining in the classroom was shared by all principals.

In contrast, ineffective teachers were described as being “combative with students,” and more likely to “yell” at the student. As stated by the MCHS principal, “Ineffective teachers respond by hollering and screaming... by belittling the person who is misbehaving....and making the student feel less adequate or trying to shame them into correcting themselves.”

Ineffective teachers, according to principals, “spend more time with behavior than teaching,” and “let behavior (issues) take over the classroom.” One principal even stated that ineffective teachers usually, “make it (behavior issues in the classroom) worse,” resulting in the student being removed from the classroom. Another principal commented that ineffective teachers, “send the child out for every little thing...not having a pencil, materials,” while another principal shared that in regard to student behavior issues, ineffective teachers just “want administration to fix it.” Four administrators noted that ineffective teachers were more likely to use their past experience or knowledge of a student against the student. They further stated that teachers treat students differently because they have a predetermined idea about the student, which they gain from looking at the student’s previous records.

Ineffective Teachers and the Impact on Disproportionality

Some principals contend that suspension disproportionality of disabled versus non-disabled students is because general education teachers, “don’t know how to modify,” or that “teachers don’t understand how to implement the IEP.” Still other administrators point out that general education teachers often, “don’t want to deal” with the additional paperwork or the student and therefore, are “quick to write those students up.” One administrator commented that lack of a strong foundational reading program has resulted in students being overly identified.

With a higher percentage of students in special education, “...we are more likely to flag in discipline.” While each of those theories may have merit, data related to teacher attendance and qualifications may shed light on the issue of disproportionality.

In considering how “less experienced” teachers impact disproportionality of students with disabilities, it is also important to take into consideration how often those students are exposed to substitute teachers. Table 10 notes the average teaching experience of elementary special education teachers at 30.67 years. Unlike the district average teaching experience, it is a fair representation of teachers’ experience for the elementary and middle levels where teaching experience ranges from 28 to 36 years and 26 to 30 years respectively. The high school average years of experience is reflected slightly lower with two of the seven teachers having less than 15 years and the remaining five teachers having greater than 22 years. On average, special education teachers miss greater than 10 sick days per school year, which is twice the amount that the average general education teacher misses per year. These days do not include days or portions of days where special education teachers are out of the classroom due to participating in Individual Education Plan meetings, since those days are covered, “in house,” by a paraprofessional or a due process clerk. Given that each teacher is responsible for the oversight of eight to 25 student folders, a conservative estimate of days missed would range from two to four additional days that teachers are not in the classroom.

Table 16
2019-2020 Special Education Teacher Data

	Avg. Years of	Avg. # of Days Missed	% of ALP Teachers	% of Long-Term Substitutes
ELEM.	30.67 yrs.	12.5	14%	0%
MS LEVEL	26.8 yrs.	21.8	17%	17%
HIGH LEVEL	22.8 yrs.	11.14	71%	14%

A random sample review of student files reflects that during 2019-2020, approximately 67% of ODRs for students with disabilities originated from the special education classroom. The many of those referrals being written by the substitute teacher and noting that the student was, “disrespectful,” “noisy,” “won’t sit still,” “disrupting the class,” or that the student was, “tardy,” or “skipped class” altogether. Although not written in policy, per schools’ practice, substitute teachers are permitted to write student referrals. Due to the district’s struggle to obtain substitutes, administrators generally handle ODRs from substitutes harsher than the regular teacher. In analyzing Table 12 and Table 16, there appears to be a correlation between the percentage of students with disabilities receiving ODRs and the percentage of “inexperienced” teachers.

Avoidance Practices of the Principal Noted as a Factor

When asked who had the greatest impact on student behavior, 78% of principals interviewed responded that the classroom teacher had the greatest impact. They stated that the classroom teacher spent more time with the student, therefore had greater opportunity to build rapport. Only two of the nine administrators stated that they believed that administrators had the greatest impact, and both contributed that administrator impact to being able to mold how the classroom teacher interacted with students. Administrators believed that most behavior which results in disciplinary action is most likely because of two reasons: the teacher failed to deescalate the situation in the classroom or students lacked needed social skills to be able to interact with their peers.

Principals were asked to describe a typical behavior scenario from beginning to end. In all scenarios, principals depicted a student being non-compliant and a teacher unable to de-escalate the situation. Once students reached the office, all principals communicated that they

spent time with the student to determine the root cause of the behavior. Their depiction described interactions as compassionate, focused on problem-solving and with intent to maintain the dignity of the student. One area noted by the researcher was only one of the nine administrators remarked that they would contact a parent while providing the behavior scenario. The majority of the administrators shared that unless the incident involved a weapon, physical altercation or drugs, they did not communicate with the parent. When asked at what point they would contact the parent, they stated that parents were generally not contacted until the student became a repeat offender, or if the child needed to be taken home. Not only did the majority of principals avoid contacting parents for minor disciplinary actions, but secondary principals also stated that they often allowed students who had been sent to the office to remain there until time to go to the next period without a referral to the counselor or any follow up with the classroom teacher. This practice is permissible per the district's student policy handbook.

Elementary principals reported that when they did contact parents, they were likely to take parental input into consideration when considering consequences for students. One elementary principal stated, "If the parent says they will handle it at home, I am more lenient at school." Another elementary principal stated, "Sometimes the parent handling it is enough and sometimes I need the student to know there are consequences in the building." Secondary principals shared while they did occasionally seek parental assistance in addressing a behavior issue, most of the time, they had already decided what disciplinary steps would be taken next.

While the majority of disciplinary actions occur due to ODRs which originate from the classroom, building level administrators ultimately determine the outcome. With the exception of student possessing a gun, a building level administrator has discretion to suspend or not to suspend students. So, what factors do administrators consider when determining to use

exclusionary practices? Half of administrators reported considering ensuring the safety of the school by suspending a student. Administrators noted they considered if the student's behavior was due to their disability and stated they reviewed the student's IEP before making any determination regarding removal from school.

Critical to note is that the number one factor principals considered when determining to utilize an exclusionary practice was if the student was a "repeat offender." Defined by principals as having two or more office referrals for the same or similar incident, repeat offenders, according to principals, tend to receive harsher consequences, despite the fact that parents may not have been contacted the first few times the student was seen in the office.

Lack of Multi-Tiered System of Support Cited as a Factor

Not to be confused as an academic or behavioral curriculum, MTSS is a framework that provides teachers with a clear understanding of how to ensure students receive targeted interventions for their academic, behavioral, and social-emotional needs, and should assist in building "teacher's capacity to reach varied learners," (Hollingsworth, 2019, p 35). Comprised of three tiers: 1) Tier I – whole class, 2) Tier II – small group, and 3) Tier III – intensive individualized support, MTSS should guide teachers towards a systematic approach to teaching and supporting students.

Principals noted that given the district's novice and waived teacher rates, teachers needed additional training and support in working with challenging students. They also expressed that lack of teacher skill and available resources to implement student interventions, along with limited disciplinary options, often resulted in In-School Suspension (ISS) and Out of School Suspension (OSS) being heavily used.

Under the umbrella of the MTSS framework, Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports, focus on teaching students appropriate school behavior. In *Beyond Suspension*, Skiba and colleagues are quoted as stating, “positive behavior supports, and social-emotional learning strategies show promise” (U.S. CCR, 2019, p.93), and that schools who implement PBIS not only see positive results related to reading and safety ratings but that they also “decreased their number of discipline referrals and reduced student aggression” (U.S. CCR, 2019, p.93).

Per the District’s Comprehensive Coordinating Early Intervening Services (CCEIS) application, Maple Cove School District conducted a root cause analysis and as a result focused their CCEIS plan of action around the design and implementation of MTSS to include training all staff (teachers, paraeducators, bus drivers and office staff).

Policy Cited as a Factor for Disproportionality

Seven out of nine administrators cited the district’s student handbook policies as being a barrier when it came to implementing discipline. Principals reported that the student handbook, “tied their hands,” and was often “too vague,” or “too harsh.” *Beyond Suspension* reports that,

Schools that have experienced higher rates of misbehavior are more likely to adopt stricter discipline codes. Since African American students tend to be over-represented at schools that have adopted such codes, this can have an effect on rates of discipline (US CRR, 2019, p.179).

Beyond Suspension further reports that despite the differences in student codes of conduct in those schools, since student discipline is equitably administered, the discipline codes are not discriminatory.

School officials at those schools and school districts, who tend to be disproportionately minority themselves, appear to have chosen it for the school or school district based on their judgment of what was useful for maintaining classrooms where students can learn. (US CRR, 2019, p.179).

In examining the Maple Cove Student Policy Handbook, a list of prohibited conduct appears in three separate locations. Though many prohibited behaviors are based upon state laws, the few factors that could be considered low level such as disrespect (insubordination) and truancy (skipping class) are the three highest reasons for ODRs. In an effort to minimize the use of exclusionary practices many schools have looked at minimizing or removing policies related to “catchall behaviors,” such as disrespect and failing to comply (Dominus, 2016).

All administrators interviewed stated that they believed suspension had an adverse effect on students, citing that not only did suspension cause students to miss out on learning, but that it caused students to have negative feelings about school. One administrator noted that suspension actually teaches students avoidance.

I think it does, especially in the cases where it's a kid that is always being suspended...we are teaching our kids how to handle certain situations such as, they don't have to. You don't have to see him (the teacher) again. Yes, I think it's detrimental to the student.

Since students with disabilities are at a much higher risk to be suspended than their non-disabled peers, multiple suspensions place students with special needs in even graver danger. Not only do these students not receive the academic services they so greatly need to meet their learning goals, but they also often fail to receive support services such as speech and physical therapy. We must ask ourselves, “Is removing students with the greatest needs from the learning environment, the most effective way to change their behavior?”

Despite that administrators recognize suspending students can do more harm than good, they continue to use exclusionary practices. During the 2019-2020 school year, 70% of all ODRs resulted in either ISS or OSS and were assigned by an administrator.

So why do administrators choose to suspend? According to one principal, administrators need “options for removing kids, not just ISS or OSS.” He further added, “We need something that will fit our school culture. We have to have more interventions.”

Changes Needed as Cited by Principals

Many principals mentioned the need for not only policy but district wide program changes. Noting that if teachers were provided additional professional development to become more effective, students would be less likely to misbehave. Others contend that by implementing a behavioral system which would explicitly teach desired student behaviors, with a focus of maintaining a positive atmosphere, discipline referrals would decrease, and the overall school culture would improve. If these are the changes principals request to impact their suspension rates, is it possible that suspension rates are not a product of student behavior, but rather a reflection of teacher effectiveness, administrator practices, and school policy?

Chapter Five: Discussion, Recommendations and Conclusions

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to examine the problem of practice found in discipline disproportionality of Black students with disabilities in an urban school district with a majority Black student, teacher and administrator population. The study utilized a case study qualitative inquiry approach, using historical data ascertained from state and local databases, and data collected from interviews with building level administrators. The guiding research questions were:

1. How do Office Discipline Referrals (ODRs) differ between students with and without disabilities?
2. From the principal's perspective, what factors influence why students with disabilities receive Office Discipline Referrals in a majority Black school?
3. From the principal's perspective, what factors impact the disciplinary decisions made by building level administrators, in regard to students with disabilities?
4. What current policies or practices create benefits or barriers to meeting the needs of students with disabilities?

Chapter Five analyzes new information gathered from the research study, connects it to the supporting research found in literature, and examines the impact of current policy and practices on discipline disproportionality. The goal of the study was to explore potential root causes of discipline disproportionality to assist school leaders in designing effective programs, policy and practices which support teachers and administrators in minimizing exclusionary practices and thus combating the over representation of students with disabilities. Furthermore,

Chapter Five serves to provide recommendations for addressing discipline disproportionality and a foundation for future research.

Intersection of Race and Disability

Like many school districts across the nation, Maple Cove School District experiences higher rates of exclusionary practices (suspension) for Black students with disabilities. With a student demographic of 96% African American, Skiba, et al's (2005), research would indicate high rates of suspension are not surprising since "...a school's percentage of black student enrollment is consistently a strong predictor of school suspensions," and that schools with "a higher percentage of black students compared to white students...is more likely to have more suspensions," (USCCR, 2019, p. 78). In much of the research on disproportionality, harsher punishment for Black students, particularly students with disabilities is often attributed to the lack of cultural awareness or implicit bias by teachers and administrators. With that said, the majority of studies were not conducted in schools or districts that mirror Maple Cove School District's student and staff demographics.

According to the United States Department of Education, National Center for Educational Statistics, only 31% of schools in the nation have greater than 75% minority enrollment, of which only 25% of those schools have a student enrollment where 75% or greater of the students are Black. Furthermore, in 2017-2018, The United States Department of Education reported that only 6.7% of all teachers in public education were Black (US Dept. of Ed., NCES, 2019). Unlike 75% of school districts across the nation, Maple Cove School District not only has a Black student enrollment of greater than 75%, the teacher and building level administrator demographic is 93% and 100% Black respectively. This is not to say that implicit bias or lack of cultural awareness cannot exist.

Despite federal mandates to provide “needed behavioral supports to students with disabilities to ensure that these students receive FAPE and are placed in the least restrictive learning environment (LRE),” (Beyond Suspension, 2019, p. 71), suspension data across the nation still reports that students with disabilities are two times more likely to be suspended, and that students of color with disabilities are at an even higher risk, (Beyond Suspension, 2019, p. 71). This statistic holds true in the Maple Cove School District. Building level administrators noted that while they did not believe that MCSD’s disproportionality was related to student race, it was possible that other factors contributed to the disparity between students with and without disabilities. The sections below provide a summary of the key findings.

Teacher Effectiveness

Outside of student behavior, there are additional factors that may impact the increase of student suspension rates; one such school level factor being teacher experience. Studies have found that teachers who possess greater skills in classroom management, and who are able to engage students in the learning process are more likely to see less student misbehaviors and fewer suspension rates (Osher, et al., 2010 & Skiba, et al. 2009). These types of teachers do not generally come straight from the college classroom. Classroom management skills are rarely learned from a semester of student teaching, but rather take years of experience and professional mentoring to develop. The ability to engage students not only requires deep mastery of one’s content, but it also requires the teacher to have a great understanding of the diverse learning needs of each student.

The National Research Council (NRC) conducted a study of minority students in special and gifted education. As part of the findings, NRC reported, “schools with higher concentrations of low-income, minority children are less likely to have experienced, well-trained teachers,”

(National Research Council, 2002, p.358). Over the last 15 years, Maple Cove School District (MCSD) has experienced high teacher turnover and an increase in teachers serving without a traditional license such as waivers, emergency teaching permits (ETPs) or serving out of area under an additional licensure plan (ALP). While this may be in part to the national teaching shortage, it could also be due to MCSD's salary schedule being at the state minimum, the city's population decline of 10,592 from 2010 to 2018 or the city having a 26.8% poverty rate compared to the 16.2% state average. Whatever the reason, 18% of MCSD's teaching staff falls under the category of novice teacher and 23% are without a standard teaching license.

Throughout the course of the interviews, building level administrators reiterated that one major reason students were likely to receive an ODR is due to characteristics of the classroom environment such as lack of established classroom procedures, lack of appropriate planning, and lack of student engagement. Principals noted that while novice teachers required greater administrative support with developing classroom management skills and utilizing effective instructional strategies, significantly older teachers also needed additional support in engaging students. Limited research exists on teacher effectiveness and age; however, it is possible that older teachers' technology skills hinder their ability to connect with students. It is also possible that they were not provided needed support when they first entered the field, and their current struggles are a result of lack of professional development.

resource room factors.

If the effectiveness of a teacher can impact student discipline, then data may support why students with disabilities at MCSD are more likely to be suspended than their non-disabled peers. Though the majority of special education teachers have greater than three years' teaching experience as presented in Table 16, the percentage of ALP teachers, coupled with the

percentage of long-term substitutes is alarming. Even more concerning is the high rate of absenteeism for special education teachers. On average, MCSD special education teachers miss between two and four weeks of school, which means students in special education are exposed to substitute teachers who are not trained to meet their diverse learning and behavioral needs. Noted as the second highest reason for students with disabilities to receive ODRs, cutting class may be tied to student avoidance of interacting with substitutes. The lack of training to understand student needs and the practice of allowing substitutes to issue ODRs could explain why 67% of office referrals for students with disabilities originate in the special education classroom.

Multi-tiered Support System

Principals communicated that ODRs were often a result of lack of student engagement. They noted that when students did not understand the work presented, they were more likely to misbehave or skip class. Principals also note that current disciplinary options did not take into consideration the need of the student, and that there was a need for structured interventions. With high teacher turnover rates, an 18% novice teacher population and 23% of teachers serving without a standard license, a district wide Multi-Tiered Support System (MTSS) could assist in not only proactively targeting the academic and behavioral needs of students, but also serve to provide teachers with clear and concise direction. Principals consistently agreed that a program to address academic and behavioral issues would be beneficial. They further communicated that they believed some form of character education and/or social skills training was also needed.

Policy and Practice of the Principal

The principal's perspective on discipline plays an important part in the disparity of exclusionary practices used regarding students of color and disabilities, (Skiba et al, 2013).

Principals who blame parenting skills and poverty were more likely to utilize exclusionary practices than principals who sought to find balance between enforcing school rules and using suspension for only the most needed cases, (Rausch & Skiba, 2005). Though all principals interviewed agreed that suspension can have an adverse effect on students, they continue to suspend students for minor behavioral infractions. This may be due to their perception that there are few choices available for them through policy. Some indicated that suspension occurred in order to demonstrate support of the teacher.

When asked if there were any benefits or barriers to policies, principals noted that the policies found in the student handbook were often too harsh or that the handbook offered few options other than In-School-Suspension (ISS) and Out-of-School Suspension (OSS). Again, principals requested specific levels of interventions that they could choose from when working with students. Aside from the principals' request to more deeply examine policy, two factors related to principal practice were noted during interviews – engaging parents and avoidance.

parental involvement.

Perhaps some of the greatest insight is gained not from what others say but rather from what they fail to speak of. As part of the interview, principals were asked to provide a typical discipline scenario, that would ultimately result in an office referral. All administrators described a classroom interaction where a student failed to comply, and a teacher failed to deescalate the situation. Throughout their scenarios, principals commented on what factors they took into consideration before deciding to suspend a student. These factors included: the students homelife, if the student's behavior was due to their disability, which teacher made the referral, and if the incident jeopardized the safety of other students. The greatest factor, however,

in determining whether or not to suspend a student was if the student was a repeat offender (having multiple ODRs for the same or similar behavior).

Although all principals provided detailed examples of how they counselled students, and intentionally attempted to determine the root cause of the behavior once the student was in their office, only one administrator mentioned involving the parent before the student became a repeat offender. Not only did administrators not involve parents, they also did not mention making referrals to school counselors, the School Intervention Team (SIT) or attempting to mediate the issue with the student and teachers prior to the student returning to the classroom. Principals even indicated that when they did contact parents, it was unlikely that parental input would change the discipline decision.

avoidance practices.

Administrator avoidance is not only common practice with parental involvement, at the secondary level they utilize the same tool to address some behavioral issues. When a principal believed that a student may have been unjustly sent to the office by an ineffective teacher, students were allowed to remain in the office until the end of the period, so that the student did not risk going back to the classroom, resulting in greater issues. Occasionally, students would even be allowed to return to the principal's office for several days during that period. While this may be viewed as an option to address partial suspension from the classroom, at no time did any administrator discuss how they reinstated the student back into the classroom, or the effectiveness of the practice.

Limitations and Delimitations

While great care was taken to collect and interpret historical disciplinary data, the researcher often found that Office Discipline Referrals (ODRs), were entered into the state data

system using the name of the administrator as opposed to the name of the teacher who had made the referral. Due to this practice, at times the researcher had to examine the physical file of the individual student based on the narrative provided within the digital system to determine the origin of the ODR. While reviewing student files, it was noted that ODRs were often placed in student files without any indication that the issue had been addressed. Another limitation was found in that three of the head principals (Cypress, Oakland and MCHS), were serving in interim positions and may not have as deep of knowledge had they served in that position the previous year. Regardless of the measures taken to ensure principals that the data collected from the interviews would in no way impact their evaluations, it is still possible that answers provided were guarded.

The nature of the study required the use of interviews in order to determine potential root causes. Due to the impact of COVID-19, less than 40% of students physically attended school on campus. Consequently, the number of ODRs declined significantly during the 2020-2021 school year. To avoid the use of potentially skewed data, ODRs from this school year were not used as a part of the comparison. The impact of COVID-19 was also the driving factor for the researcher to conduct all interviews via Zoom. This decision may have impacted interviews as the dialogue was not as natural had the interview been face to face.

Two considerations to extend this study are to use teacher and student focus groups to collect perceptual data by interviewing students with disabilities and the teachers who serve them; this could provide greater insight to determine if implicit bias is a contributing factor to ODRs. Additionally, examining data from the Teacher Effective Support System (TESS) could assist in determining if a correlation exists between a teacher's ratings and the number of ODRs he/she writes. Since the current practice of entering the ODR under the administrators' name has

not fully changed, it would be best to establish a new practice, then examine the data quarterly, beginning the fall of 2021.

Conceptual Framework Revisited

The researcher's original conceptual framework was built upon the belief that three factors impacted discipline disproportionality in Black students with disabilities: 1) teacher effectiveness, 2) lack of shared behavioral expectations and 3) implicit bias regarding special education. As noted in Chapter One, Maple Cove School District lacks a unified belief regarding behavioral expectations. Without an adopted system to provide structured support for behavior interventions, classroom teachers continue to send mixed messages regarding expectations to students with and without disabilities in the manner they administer classroom discipline. *Figure 2* specifically notes a lack of shared behavioral expectations, however, upon data collected through interviews and further research, it would appear that a behavioral system is not all that is needed. A Multi-Tiered Support System (MTSS) that includes behavior interventions and academic interventions is needed to assist with increasing student engagement.

Though some administrators noted disproportionality may be related to teachers lacking the will or skill to work with students with disabilities, it was more credited to their lack of effective strategies than implicit bias. While implicit bias regarding serving students with disabilities may be factor, it did not demonstrate as prevalent. One factor that did appear to impact disproportionality is certain practices of principals. Since principals are responsible for implementing exclusionary practices, how they approach supporting and disciplining students, (specifically students with disabilities) determines the outcome for the student. Principals who are less likely to involve parents, avoid using mediation strategies with teachers and students or who are not aware of disciplinary options, are more likely to continue suspending students.

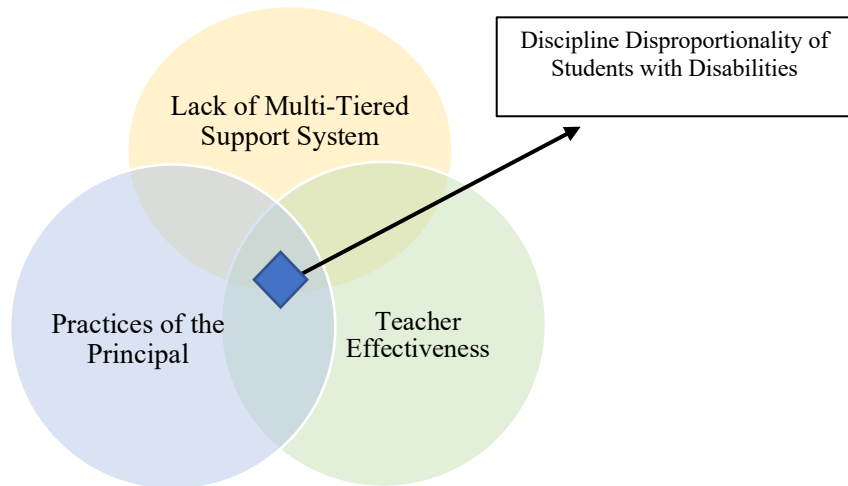


Figure 3. Conceptual Framework Revised

Recommendations for Professional Practice

Based upon the findings of this study, three recommendations are suggested by the researcher in order to close the disparity of discipline disproportionality of students with disabilities and are described in the sections below.

Implementation of MTSS

Based upon findings of this study, the researcher recommends implementing a district wide Multi-Tiered Support System that includes academic and behavioral interventions. Effective behavioral interventions include components which address the social emotional needs of students and focus on teaching desired positive behaviors. As part of the MTSS, establishing core tenets would assist School Interventions Teams (SIT) in defining their purpose and provide a framework for decision making. Since “principals’ instructional leadership behaviors are important in influencing teacher behaviors that will subsequently impact student achievement,” (McFarland, 2014, p.16.), it would be critical for district administration to include building level leaders as well as their building leadership teams in the process of developing the MTSS. This

will also assist in developing shared operational language that clearly defines the academic and behavior expectations of students and adults.

As noted by Dr. Sonja Hollingsworth in *Multi-tiered System of Supports as Collective Work: a (Re) structuring Option for Middle Schools*, establishing teacher efficacy is imperative in order to maintain sustainability. Once the MTSS is designed, professional development should be scheduled to include all adults in the building, which include sharing the purpose and expectations around the implementation. Based upon the changes, principals will need to become aware of resources and changes to the student handbook policy that will be needed.

During the first few weeks of school, modeling and explicitly teaching desired academic and behavioral expectations will be important to supporting sustained learning for students. Continually monitoring the implementation phase during their collaborative planning time will assist teams in determining if any modifications need to be made. It will also allow them to share any concerns they have which may impact successful implementation with their building leader. Utilizing various methods of communication to reach parents and guardians (social media, parent letters, emails, text messages) would be beneficial in ensuring parents are aware of the new interventions available for their children.

Systemic Changes

Professional Development for Teachers

According to the Educational Research Newsletter (2003), “effective teachers are the most important factor contributing to student achievement” (p. 1). With such a high rate of novice and non-traditional teachers, it is no wonder that principals continuously reiterated the need of professional development for teachers to include working with students with disabilities. Though MCSD has a written professional development plan, it is focused on the implementation

of the Science of Reading to increase student achievement in reading, collaborative teaming, and skills needed for curriculum alignment. While special education teachers are provided with yearly training on requirements of accommodations, modifications and differentiating instruction, general education teachers are not required to attend, nor is there district required training related to understanding and implementing IEPs for general education teachers. Though the district requires new teachers to participate in Novice Cohort, (a monthly professional development training focused on meeting their unique challenges), the training has historically provided information on classroom management and the purpose of collaborative teaming. The researcher recommends that annual training focused on inclusionary practices, the impact of disabilities on student learning and behavior, and MTSS be required for all teachers.

Recently, the Arkansas Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) announced the addition of the Special Education Resource Teacher Academy (LS-21-056) which would pay the tuition and fees for any licensed teacher seeking to earn their certification in special education. MCSD should consider providing incentives that would encourage teachers to participate in the program. Incentives could include: 1) reimbursing teachers for their Praxis fee once the teacher has passed the required Special Education: Core Knowledge and Applications assessment, 2) stipends for general educators who not only provide instruction to students with disabilities who are served in their classroom but who also manages their IEP.

By increasing the number of general education teachers who are certified not only in their content but in special education, students with disabilities will have greater opportunity to participate in the least restrictive environment. They will have a higher likelihood of receiving instruction from a teacher who has greater content mastery and understands the needs of students

with disabilities. Lastly, by providing students with disabilities teachers who are dually certified, we provide them the opportunity to develop socially with their peers.

Professional Development for Principals

While principals are credited with being the leaders of their building, they must also embrace being the lead learner. Principals must be made aware that while avoidance practices do solve the problem momentarily, it ultimately creates larger relationship issues. Based upon the findings of this study, the researcher recommends that principals participate in professional development focused on 1) engaging parents to be partners in the learning process, 2) MTSS as noted above and, 3) supporting teachers in effective practices.

One barrier mentioned by principals, was the lack of disciplinary options within the student handbook which allowed them to meet the needs of students. It is important to note that in November of 2019, the district's Manifest Determination Review (MDR) Protocol was revised. All principals were trained on the new protocol, which provided step by step instructions on how to address disciplinary issues with students served through special education. The protocol specifically called for proactive steps, which required an IEP meeting to be held once a student received six removals from their learning environment, and any removal following. As part of the protocol, administrators are required to attend the IEP meeting. During the training, principals were made aware of the importance of following the IEP, and specifically the student's Behavioral Intervention Plan (BIP). Principals were encouraged to reach out to the district special education team for support in making decisions regarding discipline.

In December of 2020, as noted in Table 7, MCSD was notified that while they still triggered for significant disproportionality, the risk ratio had dropped to 5.98 from 20.89 as recorded the previous year. Though principals did not specifically mention the MDR protocol, a

few principals mentioned they knew they needed to watch suspension rates of students with disabilities. If principals perceive that having additional interventions assists them in finding alternatives to suspension, the new MDR protocol and the training received, may have affected principal practice.

Although principals noted lack of adequate interventions, upon the researcher's review of the student handbook, multiple interventions are provided at each disciplinary level. Level I lists 17 interventions and Levels II-IV lists 20, which include: 1) referral to the School Intervention Team (SIT), 2) use of restorative justice practices, 3) referral to a community organization, 4) mentoring and several others. Providing professional development to principals centered around exploring the student policy handbook and ensuring that principals have an understanding of as well as how to access the interventions listed in the student policy handbook could assist in lowering suspension rates.

Discipline Data Collection

Maple Cove School District would greatly benefit by establishing protocols related to data entry of student discipline. As part of the protocol, determining specific pieces of information that is to be included in all office discipline referrals (ODRs) would allow behavior data to be better analyzed. Needed information may include: the time of day the incident occurs, location of the incident and the name of the individual who made the referral. If teachers were allowed to enter interventions steps taken with students into a digital platform (such as SmartData dashboard) before the student receives an ODR, it could allow administrators and teams to be proactive in addressing student behavior, before the behavior becomes repetitive. It could also assist principals and behavior teams in tracking behavior challenges of students from

classroom to classroom. This system could also be programmed to notify parents of behavioral concerns.

Review of Policy & Practice

As part of annual professional development for teachers and principals, reviewing current policy and practices within the district could serve the students and faculty well. Amending the practice of allowing substitutes to issue ODRs to students, specifically to students with disabilities should be considered or providing specialized training for individuals who work in resource rooms. Working towards a more academically inclusive school environment, may assist in minimizing the numbers of students with disabilities cutting classes. A possible piece to impacting disparity through policy is the committed focus of ensuring students with disabilities are provided quality instruction when teachers have extended absences. Examining the hiring practices of special education teachers as well as retention incentives is recommended. Lastly, committing to proactive partnerships with parents is essential.

Implications for Future Research

Based upon the findings of this study the researcher recommends that further research be conducted to examine the impact of high teacher absenteeism on the behavior of students with disabilities. Attention should be directed in determining what factors impact absenteeism of both regular educators and special educators. Future research could also be conducted to examine the ratio of time building level leaders spend in developing special education teachers compared to general education teachers in becoming highly effective. Another study that could be beneficial to address discipline disproportionality is the impact of teachers with non-traditional licenses, serving as special education teachers on the academic and behavioral success of students with

disabilities. Each of the above-mentioned research studies, impact the quality of instruction students with disabilities receive.

Outside of discipline disproportionality, additional research on school districts that have greater than 85% minority student and staff population would be beneficial in understanding how to meet the diverse needs of our students. One concept that emerged during this study was the implication of teacher effectiveness and teachers with greater than 20 years teaching experience. Regarding the future of public education, fewer individuals are electing to join the teaching profession. This shortage has caused many teachers to remain in the classroom well past meeting retirement requirements and has created a need to provide non-traditional teachers access to classrooms. If this is our new pathway to maintaining staff in classrooms, the Arkansas Department of Elementary and Secondary education may need revisit provisions for providing teacher mentors to both spectrums of teachers.

Conclusion

In the fall of 2021, it is our expectation that students will once again fill classrooms and hallways of schools across the nation. For some students in Maple Cove School District, it will mean moving from a home setting to an environment full of learners. While MCSD has had a reprieve from ODRs, the transition from home to school setting will likely bring a surge in behavioral challenges. We must be ready to meet the needs of our students so that valuable days of instruction are no longer taken from them for the sake of punishment.

The purpose of this study was to determine factors that impact discipline disproportionality for Black students with disabilities in a school district with majority Black students, staff and building administration. Research demonstrates time and time again, that schools with high poverty and high percentages of minority students, are less likely to have

access to highly qualified teachers and more likely to hire teachers who do not possess a teaching license. Districts with high poverty and high minority student enrollment are also more likely to have harsher disciplinary policies and suspend students at higher rates.

This study reveals that while the overall suspension rates are high for all Black students, students with disabilities experience even greater rates of suspension. Principals largely attribute discipline disparity to students' lack of access to effective teaching. While they acknowledge exclusionary practices have adverse effects on student achievement, without alternatives, they continue to utilize suspension. Findings of this study appear to indicate that teacher effectiveness, lack of a multi-tiered support system and principal practices contribute to discipline disproportionality. This study further calls for greater investigation of the impact of teacher absenteeism and teacher credentials on the behavior of students with disabilities.

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Appendix

Appendix A: Interview Protocol

Research Questions:

1. How do Office Discipline Referrals (ODRs) differ between students with and without disabilities?
2. From the principal's perspective, what factors influence why students with disabilities receive Office Discipline Referrals in a majority Black school?
3. From the principal's perspective, what factors impact the disciplinary decisions made by building level administrators, in regard to students with disabilities?
4. What current policies or practices create benefits or barriers to meeting the needs of students with disabilities?

Survey Questions

Survey information was obtained prior to the interview occurring. It was collected using a Google Form. Prior to data being collected, participants signed a consent form, agreeing to participant in the study.

1. What is your name?
2. What is your age?
3. What is your gender?
4. Prior to becoming an administrator, how did you serve in education? (Teacher, counselor, coach)
5. How many years (total) have you served in education?
6. How many years in the classroom?
7. How many years as a building level administrator (principal or assistant principal)?
8. How many years as "other"? (Instructional coach, coach, media specialist, etc?)
9. What is your educational degree? (MA, EdS, Ed.D)
 - a. What college/s did you attend
10. What type of Administrative Program did you complete? (on campus/online/blended)
11. Do you live in the Pine Bluff Community?
 - a. If yes – How long?
 - b. If no – What community do you live in?

Due to the restrictions of COVID, all interviews were conducted via Zoom. Once participants completed the survey, interviews were scheduled based upon the participant's availability and preference. The researcher created a Zoom link and invited the participant. Before beginning each interview, informed consent statement was read and verbal agreement to participate in the interview process was gained.

Semi-Structured Interview Questions

1) What made you want to become an administrator?

You mentioned ...a/b how does your role as an administrator allow you to do that?

- a. Making a difference for students/teachers...
 - Supporting teachers
 - *What types of support do teachers need most?*
 - *Is there a certain type of teacher that needs more support than others?*
 - *How would teachers describe leader support?*
 - Disciplining students (Lead into the next question)
- b. Being in charge/leader

2) Talk to me about effective teachers. What does an effective teacher look like? What do they do that makes them effective?

- *How does an effective/ ineffective teacher respond to behavior issues in the classroom?*
- *I want you to think of a teacher that rarely refers a student to the office, now think of a teacher that has a higher office referral rate. What is different and similar about their classrooms? Their backgrounds, their beliefs?*

3) Walk me through a typical discipline scenario at [Insert Name of School]

- *What are some of the most common reasons students are sent to the office for?*
 - *I heard you mention fighting/ gangs/bullying/ insubordination/ disrespect/talking back/refusal to work*
Can you define/explain that for me?
Why would a student.... refuse?
Do you think teacher personalities play into – can you go into more detail with that? What are some reasons teachers may treat students differently?
(How would you support “those types “of teachers?
 - *What are the three to four major reasons you get office referrals? Are they majority of them warranted?*
 - **What percentages of referrals that come to your office are?**
 - Severe / Moderate / Minor
- i. *You talked about parents and their involvement, how does that come into play when disciplining a student? If a parent says, “I’ll handle it” compared to “My child is never wrong.” Why does that make a difference?*

- 4) Why do you think behavior that requires disciplinary action happens?**
a. Are there ever times when a referral comes to you that is most likely ISS and because of what happens in the office becomes OSS.
- 5) Are there students who seem to have more behavioral issues than others?**
*i. Males/Females
ii. IEP/Non-IEP
iii. Certain Grades?
iv. Race*
- 6) What factors do you consider when determining to suspend or not to suspend a student?**
*a. Do those same factors come into play when working with a student on an IEP?
b. What are some of your most challenging disciplinary issues? (what gives you the most heartburn)*
- 7) When suspension does occur, do you think there are adverse effects it might have on the student?**
*a. What do you think students are doing when they are suspended, and not at school?
b. Are there systems in place to help a student when they return so they can (catch up with work, assist with relationships between the referring teacher, counseling?)*
- 8) As an administrator you work through the lens of your student handbook, does it pose barriers or assist you in the area of discipline?**
*a. Are there ever times you find your handbook makes it difficult for you to address discipline? What do you do during those times?
b. If you could change any policy or system within your school as it relates to supporting teachers/discipline, what would you change? Why would you change it?*
- 9) If you could implement one program, one system, one unified belief to impact student behavior, what would you choose to implement?**
How would that change your school from now to what you want it to be?
- 10) Who has the greatest impact on student discipline?**
*○ Teachers - Do you think teachers really know how to handle discipline?
○ Principals – How and Why?*
- 11) Our district has been identified as having significant disproportionality of disciplining Black students with disabilities. Why do you think that is?**

Appendix B: Codebook

Code	Description
TEACHER	

Prepared	Responses described well planned and executed lessons which led to consistency in instruction, planning for every minute of instruction
Communication	Responses described ability to communicate with parents, students and colleagues
Content Mastery	Responses described deep understanding of curriculum, knowledge of content, confidence in content
Pedagogy	Responses described ability to group students, engagement in learning, provide learning activities with meaning, can adjust instruction quickly to meet needs of students
Attributes	Responses described teachers who are compassionate, joyful, set high expectations, build positive relationships with students, do what's best for students, set high expectation and hold students accountable
Classroom Management Skills	Responses describe classrooms with set routines and procedures, known expectations, have fewer disciplinary issues, proactive in parent communication when issues arise

ADDRESSING MISBEHAVIOR

De-escalate	Responses described ability to calm student, focus on cause of behavior not student actions, ability of teacher to remain calm
Re-Directing	Responses focused on teacher's ability to minimize the impact of the behavior on instruction, not letting issues take over classroom
Student Centered	Responses focused on maintaining dignity of student, correcting misbehavior privately, empowers student to make choices

SYSTEMIC ISSUES

Parental Involvement	Lack of response conveyed parental involvement not a priority when addressing discipline issues
Teacher Training	Responses described need for additional teacher training specifically for novice (classroom management) and much older teachers (use of technology)
Behavior Interventions	Responses indicated lack of known behavior interventions available, need for interventions that fit the school culture, unified interventions
Avoidance Practices	Responses describe lack of communicating with parents prior to behavior becoming a pattern, allowing student to remain out of classroom
Policy Barriers	Responses described policies were too harsh, vague or not in alignment with school needs, needs amended to meet needs of students
Academic Deficits	Responses indicated behavior is often a result of academic issues, students' needs aren't being met in the classroom

DETERMINING SUSPENSION

Student home life	Responses described concern for student's well-being and safety, ability to access food
Safety of Others	Responses described need to ensure school was safe
Student Disability	Responses described determining if the behavior was a result of the disability, review of student behavior plan
Repeat Offender	Responses described consideration for if the student having multiple disciplinary referrals

DISTRICT WIDE SYSTEMS

MTSS	Responses described a need for unified behavior and academic interventions, structured process for interventions, restorative justice, PBIS,
Student Programs	Responses described a need for additional after-school programs geared towards rigorous enrichment and remediation, programs focused on career planning and character education for students, how to resolve problems with peers
Teacher Prep Program	Additional training for teachers at K-2 level in foundations of reading, working with students with disabilities, student engagement

SIGNIFICANT DISPROPORTIONALITY

Misrepresentation	Responses described that student demographics are not taken into consideration
Bias	Responses described using past knowledge of a student to treat them differently, students not treated fairly due to poverty or non-athlete, not wanting to make adjustments or accommodations for students
Teachers	Responses described lack of knowledge in implementing IEPs, leader did not review IEP before making a determination on discipline
Environment	Responses described students skipping class to avoid being in resource room or in classes where they struggled

Appendix C: Informed Consent

Title: Discipline Disproportionality of Black Students with Disabilities: A Principal's Perspective

Title: Disproportionality of Black Students with Disabilities: A Principal's Perspective
The Gatekeeper-Principals and Disproportionality

Researcher:

Wanda Van Dyke

John Pijanowski, PhD., Faculty Advisor

University of Arkansas, College of Curriculum and Instruction

Graduate Education Building

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Description: The present study is a qualitative study designed to investigate the phenomenon of discipline disproportionality for Black students with disabilities in an urban school district with majority Black teachers and Black administrators in southern Arkansas. Student discipline data for the 2018-2019 and 2019-2020 school year will be analyzed to determine key commonalities related to Office Discipline Referrals (ODRs). Building level administrators will be interviewed to gain insight to their perspective on discipline disproportionality within their schools.

Risks and Benefits: Given that the researcher is a direct supervisor of the individuals being interviewed, information gained during the interview could reflect negatively on their leadership skills. While the researcher is a direct supervisor, the researcher does not evaluate the participants of the study. Information gained through this study could lead to determining root causes regarding disproportionality within the district. This knowledge could assist in developing policy or implementing practices, professional development that would minimize disproportionality, not only within the examined district, but across the nation.

Voluntary Participation: No building leader will be required to participate in the study. All participants will be voluntary.

Initial Survey: Each participant will complete an online survey prior to an interview being conducted. The online survey will take approximately 10 minutes.

Interview Information: Each interview will take place via Zoom and will be recorded. Interviews will take no greater than 90 minutes.

Confidentiality: All information gained in the interview will remain confidential to the extent allowed by law and University policy. To ensure anonymity in the printed findings, the district and all schools will be given pseudo names. All data related to the individual schools will be stored in a secure location and will only be accessible to the researcher.

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IRB#: 2011298555 APPROVED: 22-Dec-2020 EXP: 7-Dec-2021

Right to Withdraw: In the event that you choose to withdraw from the interview process during any stage of the study, you may withdraw your consent. Should that occur, your data, will be omitted from the study. There will be no consequences related to your withdrawal.

Informed Consent: I, **[Insert Participant's Name]** understand the purpose of this study, the protocols that will be followed, the risks and benefits of the study and that at any time I can withdraw my consent with no repercussions.

I agree to completing an initial survey via an online platform. I realize that the interview will be recorded and coded to determine reoccurring themes. I understand that a copy of the transcript will be provided to me prior to coding. My signature denotes my choice to voluntarily participant in the study.

Questions/Concerns: For questions or concerns related to this study, please contact:

Dr. John Pijanowski Supervisor
University of Arkansas
Curriculum and Instruction
479-575-7019
jpijanow@uark.edu

If you have questions or concerns about your rights as a research participant, please contact Ro Windwalker, the University's IRB Compliance Coordinator, at 479-575-2208 or irb@uark.edu.

Participant Signature

Date

Appendix D - Invitation to Participate

TO: [Insert Leader Name]
FROM: Wanda Van Dyke, Ed. S
DATE:

Dear [Insert Leader's Name],

I am conducting interviews with building level administrators, as a part of my doctoral program. The purpose is to increase understanding of discipline disproportionality within our district for students with disabilities.

Prior to the interview, you will be asked to complete a survey related to your demographics. The survey should take no longer than ten minutes and will be via Google Form.

The interview is semi-structured and will take between 60 and 90 minutes. To adhere to current COVID practices, it will be held via Zoom and will be recorded. I am trying to capture your personal perspective regarding discipline disproportionality.

Your survey response and your interview responses will be kept confidential. At no time will your name appear in the write up of findings. Once the interview is completed, it will be transcribed, and you will have the opportunity to review your responses and make any changes or clarifications, before the interview is accepted. At any time, you can choose to withdraw from the study.

There is no compensation for this study. Your participation and insight could be valuable in assisting you to lower discipline disproportionality with your school. It could also assist schools across the nation who are facing similar challenges.

If you would be willing to participate, please suggest a date and time that works best with your schedule and I will make myself available. If you have any questions or need any clarifications, please do not hesitate to ask.

Professionally yours,

Wanda Van Dyke, Ed. S
Doctoral Student
dispro@gmail.com

Appendix E: IRB Approval Letter



To: Wanda Lee Van Dyke
From: Douglas J Adams, Chair
IRB Expedited Review
Date: 12/22/2020
Action: **Expedited Approval**
Action Date: 12/22/2020
Protocol #: 2011298555
Study Title: Disproportionality of Black Students with Disabilities: Principals' Perspectives The Gatekeeper-Principals and Disproportionality
Expiration Date: 12/07/2021
Last Approval Date:

The above-referenced protocol has been approved following expedited review by the IRB Committee that oversees research with human subjects.

If the research involves collaboration with another institution then the research cannot commence until the Committee receives written notification of approval from the collaborating institution's IRB.

It is the Principal Investigator's responsibility to obtain review and continued approval before the expiration date.

Protocols are approved for a maximum period of one year. You may not continue any research activity beyond the expiration date without Committee approval. Please submit continuation requests early enough to allow sufficient time for review. Failure to receive approval for continuation before the expiration date will result in the automatic suspension of the approval of this protocol. Information collected following suspension is unapproved research and cannot be reported or published as research data. If you do not wish continued approval, please notify the Committee of the study closure.

Adverse Events: Any serious or unexpected adverse event must be reported to the IRB Committee within 48 hours. All other adverse events should be reported within 10 working days.

Amendments: If you wish to change any aspect of this study, such as the procedures, the consent forms, study personnel, or number of participants, please submit an amendment to the IRB. All changes must be approved by the IRB Committee before they can be initiated.

You must maintain a research file for at least 3 years after completion of the study. This file should include all correspondence with the IRB Committee, original signed consent forms, and study data.

cc: John C Pijanowski, Investigator